

THEATRE AND STAGE SERIES

THE ART OF THE PLAY

BY
HERMON OULD

WITH A FOREWORD BY
HARCOURT WILLIAMS



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FOREWORD

EVER since the days of the Reformation the theatre in England has been looked upon as a wayward child, who at its best is a plaything, and at its worst an offspring of the devil. Deeply embedded in our minds is a conviction that the stage is a trivial pastime, and our joy in it is confused by an innate sense of sin, just as the naked body still distresses us, in spite of sun-bathing and a healthier modern attitude towards it.

It is this materialism in us that robs us of a real theatre-loving public that is capable of appreciating the art as a whole, an appreciation that should find in the theatre something which is as necessary to the spirit as fresh air and food are to the body.

Undoubtedly there is a large public that will flock to a popular success, some to be entertained for an hour, others to worship a personality that gives them a reflection of some romantic dream-vision of themselves, which fate and circumstance have frustrated them from realizing. There is no harm in this, but it is a meagre substitute for what the theatre can give at its best.

I have a letter from Harley Granville-Barker, in which he writes—

Real interpretative acting is art and I would sit through an evening to see FIVE MINUTES of the real thing. There is nothing like it, for it is Human Communion—the barriers that keep us apart from one another broken down for that moment under privilege of art. The miracle achieved.

And that seems to me to sum up the situation. But the miracle is not easily achieved. It is not to be won by the kind of publicity about the stage which has become the cheap commonplace of the Press in recent years, or by "fan" worship of stars, who are more often made than born, neither hysterical excitement nor condescending applause

will unlock the door of the temple. The golden key must be hammered into shape by the same process that the study of all art demands—mental application, spiritual endeavour, and that creative giving of oneself which is the only form of self-sacrifice worth a damn.

Any statement that clarifies the art of the theatre, that tends to the better understanding of it, is not only a boon but a blessed necessity. Mr. Hermon Ould, in writing this book on one aspect of the trinity—the play—has given into our hands the formula for transmuting the dross into gold, and one devoutly hopes that many will be encouraged to enter the company of dramatists, in the forefront of which there are far too few master-craftsmen.

HARCOURT WILLIAMS

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THE ART OF THE PLAY

CHAPTER I

THE DRAMATIC IMPULSE

IF there had never been a theatre, would the course of the world's history have been very different from what it has been? If that complex of human activities which we call the theatre had never existed, would the world have been the better or the worse for the lack? Does the theatre meet some fundamental need in human nature, or should we have been happier without it? And what is the theatre?

An ignoramus can ask in a minute more questions than a learned man can answer in a lifetime. It is impossible to say concisely what the theatre is. The theatre has always been in a state of transition, no attempt to fix it once and for all has ever succeeded, tradition has followed tradition, and pundits who have laid down rules for its eternal guidance have generally lived to see their rules discarded and new forms break through the barriers they wished to impose.

In this book I shall make no attempt to lay down inexorable laws. I shall be content if I find it possible to indicate some of the principles which seem to have governed the theatrical impulse throughout the ages. The theatre has taken many forms in the past, in the future it will doubtless take many more. Compare the Greek theatre, with its vast auditorium and its thirty thousand spectators, its grandiose formalism and dignified expression, with the market-place booth of the Medieval Moralities and Miracle Plays, where horse-play, crude jokes, and a sincere but naive utterance were the chief characteristics. Think of the copious outpouring of superb language which made the Elizabethan drama one of the most magnificent periods of English literature, and compare it with the post-War drawing-room

play, which is almost completely barren of literary beauty, limits its vocabulary to a few hundred commonplace words, and endeavours to reflect as accurately as possible the unimaginative talk—it would be unjust to call it conversation—of the present day. Think of the elegant and mannered prose, the exquisite artificiality and cynical aloofness of the Restoration drama, and compare it with the naturalistic plays of the early part of the twentieth century, when an exact replica of the common speech of the common people was demanded of the dramatist, and no emotion was permitted to find utterance on the stage if its exact counterpart were not current in daily life.

All these things—and many more—are the theatre, and they must all have some common principle which enables us at once to recognize them as such. What is it? What is the fundamental principle behind the theatrical impulse? One would expect it to be something simple and universal. I should like to suggest, tentatively, and somewhat crudely, that it is the desire to show off. If I were to put it more delicately, and say that the desire is one for self-expression, I should be stating only half a truth, or even less. For self-expression is the principle behind *all* art, and not only the principle behind the art of the theatre. Painters, poets, sculptors, composers, all wish to express themselves, but the desire behind their impulse is not necessarily a desire to show off. It would perhaps be true to say that the primary need of the born *dramatist* is for self-expression, but the dramatist is only one ingredient in the theatre, although, like the other ingredients, he is prone to think of himself as paramount.

No, self-expression is not the right word. The right word is “showing-off,” and, far from wishing to attack the impulse, I would maintain that it is a thoroughly healthy impulse which, when it is rightly trained and its energy is rightly directed, leads to the highest flights of theatrical art. It feeds on success, it dies of inanition if not appreciated. It is a social instinct and claims an audience; but showing-off

is of no value to the shower-off unless he has something with which to impress his fellows. A foolish child who shows off is a tiresome object, he is a much more tiresome object if he has nothing to crow about.

It comes to this. The theatre says to the world. "Lo! Come and look at me! I have something to show you that will please you and cause you to applaud me. Walk up! Walk up! Come and see the show!"

"Show!" That is the significant word—*show*. The theatre is a show. It is something which is displayed for the approval of others. It is an objective art—something which is detached from the artists concerned and takes on a separate existence. Reading a great poem or a great novel, listening to great music, we sometimes feel that we are being let into the intimacies of the author's or composer's heart and mind. "With this key," said Wordsworth of Shakespeare's sonnets, "Shakespeare unlocked his heart." The same could not be said of Shakespeare's plays. They have an existence independent of their creator and reveal not his own heart and mind, but his stupendous understanding of other men's hearts and minds. Only a psychologist with an infinitely more profound acquaintance with the workings of the human mind than any psychologist has yet revealed could deduce the man Shakespeare from the plays attributed to him.

The fact that the theatre, passing from one transmutation to another, has survived every attack upon it seems to demonstrate that it has something fundamental in its very nature, a core of immortality which ensures that it shall never cease to exist. Nothing in this universe continues to exist unless it serves a purpose. Atrophy in due course overtakes the useless. Granting provisionally that the impulse to show off is the germ from which the theatre sprang, how do we justify our approval of it? To start with it will be admitted that it is dangerous to suppress and deny our impulses, to bottle up our emotions, and to deny our instincts. Reasonable restraint, the intelligent transmuting

of unruly impulses, consideration for the feelings of others—all these things are good, but not the icy reserve, the fear of making a fool of oneself, the distrust of strong emotions, and the disinclination to yield to the stimulus of aesthetic delights, which are apt to pass for good form

From childhood onwards every human being ought to be bursting with a desire to express itself That is the principle of growth Every discovery should be an excitement The baby, when it first discovers that a spoon brought in sharp contact with the table or the rail of its chair produces a thrilling noise, and goes on making it, louder and louder, until it attracts the attention of everybody within earshot, is the theatre in embryo It is the playwright, the plot of whose play is the discovery of the combined effect of one object against another, it is the actor who expresses this wonderful discovery, and it is the showman (or producer) who stages the great event for the benefit of an audience of admiring parents, nurses, and aunts

Here we have showing-off in its most elementary form A little later comes the crawling stage, then the first walk, then, for the little boy, the great mystery of being breeched, and, for the little girl, the great mystery of not being breeched Each step provides its own drama and its own opportunities for display Soon the games period is reached Our instincts, already submitting to discipline, are now a little more subtle, we are inclined to be self-conscious, and are not quite so certain that our elders like our manifestations This is an important stage, because we are now beginning to discriminate, to hold something back, and, more important still, it is as much our own approval that we seek as the approval of others The artist, in a rudimentary form, has come into existence When we go into the cricket field, the hockey field, or the football field, our desires are no longer entirely single We are prepared to enjoy the game for its own sake, we enjoy the physical exhilaration which comes from it, we enjoy the friendly conflict with our opponents, we enjoy the sense of loyalty

which comes from working together with our fellows, and, if we are naturally healthy boys and girls, we lose self-consciousness, at least for the greater part of the time. But, admitting all these things and recognizing that they are the most valuable features of field games, there is yet that other element—the impulse to show off—which should not be under-estimated. Every boy or girl wants to win, and the desire is not altogether disinterested. The child wishes, quite naturally, to get the credit for having won, he wishes to put up a show before his fellows, if there are lookers-on, he wishes to shine in their eyes, he likes—to employ theatrical jargon—to secure a little of the limelight and the applause. The need which animates him is, in fact, the need to show off, less crude than the baby's exhibition with the spoon, less obvious than the flaunting swagger of the first appearance in knickerbockers, but springing from the same source.

And so throughout life. To do things solely for their own sake is not a human characteristic. A man on a desert island, with no hope of seeing or being seen by another human being, would not behave as one in normal contact with others. A human being is not self-sufficient; he exists as much in his relationship to other human beings as in his relationship to his own soul. A man does not, as a rule, speak to himself. A healthy human being needs to show off, if only to demonstrate how nobly he bats, how deftly he fields, how elegant she looks in her new hat, how gracefully she dances. The impulse to show off has many ugly features which need not be dwelt upon, they are sufficiently obvious. What I wish to emphasize is that the impulse in itself is an honest impulse, a natural impulse, common to the whole human race and to a fairly considerable part of the animal kingdom, that it is fundamental, and that it is the root from which the theatre springs.

Let us now consider the application of the theory. Obviously, it does not apply only to professional workers in the theatre. Showing-off, if it is a normal manifestation of

the common run of human beings, must have an outlet in all spheres of society. It must be conceded that professional actors, as a class, are endowed with a more liberal share of the impulse than other people, and, when they are "born actors," they have a natural gift of masquerading. But the majority of us are not born actors. A few of us have no gift at all for acting, some of us have a modest gift, most of us have enough acting ability to take a humble part in a theatrical performance of some kind. Those who have no talent, or are not attracted by the theatre, or are contemptuous of it, may find many other outlets for their impulse to show off, of which the chief is sport. There is no reason why a sportsman should not be an actor, but, broadly speaking, the type that makes a first-class sportsman is not the type that makes a first-class actor. The legal world, the Church, the Stock Exchange, the auctioneering room, the Houses of Parliament—these are stages for the display of histrionics scarcely less spectacular than those seen on the boards of the theatre.

A detached interest in the theatre is no more completely adequate to satisfy the impulse to show off than witnessing a Cup Final from a grandstand is a completely adequate expression of the true sportsman. Complete satisfaction comes only when one *takes part* in the theatre. At the present time the professional theatre is, broadly speaking, almost exclusively a commercial undertaking, limited in its scope by the need to make money, and no art which has ulterior motives can ultimately thrive. The commercial theatre manager's aim is to induce playwrights to write plays which pay. There is no reason why plays which pay should not be good plays, but, so long as the majority of commercial managers are men of limited sensibility and have a warped notion of what the public wants, there is little hope of a commercial theatre coming into existence with the single aim of producing good work for its own sake. In Shakespeare's time it seems to have been assumed that the common people, the groundlings, would appreciate the

best, and Shakespeare three hundred years ago was as popular with the illiterate as he is to-day with the educated masses. One thing at least is clear: the play as a means of making money is one subject, the play as an art-form is another. My concern is with the latter.

CHAPTER II

A BACKWARD GLANCE

THERE has been a tendency among writers on the drama to restrict its scope. To define is to confine, and critics who have laid down rules, whether for their own guidance or for the guidance of others, are apt to resent any departure from them. The purpose of rules in art is to aid the artist in his search for an ideal medium, not to dictate to him and restrict him. The creative artist, finding that accepted rules hinder him, will discard them unhesitatingly, but, if truly creative, he will automatically follow rules imposed by his own sense of fitness.

The rationalistic attitude to the drama, so prevalent a generation ago and still influential with those born under its sway, was as sterilizing as is the rationalistic attitude to life. It was an attitude of prohibition, decreeing that certain things were *not done* because in some way they departed from the rules governing rational conduct. To introduce an "aside" or a "soliloquy" was to commit a sin. Behaviour on the stage was required to approximate to behaviour in the Victorian or Edwardian home. This attempt to bring the drama into closer contact with life was in many respects salutary, and in later chapters we shall have occasion to expatiate on its virtues, but its theorizing was of a negative rather than of a positive character. It raised bogies to scare off innovators. A faint smear of self-righteousness lay upon it, and mediocrities with a capacity for avoidance were welcomed where brighter spirits, unwilling to run along lines laid down by others, were discouraged.

These well-meaning but somewhat myopic moulders of public taste seem to have forgotten that the drama, from primitive beginnings, has been reincarnated into a great variety of forms, and that to deny it growth and expansion

now would be as foolish as it would be futile. He would be a braver man than I who endeavoured to pierce the darkness which envelops the origins of the drama, but for the encouragement of those who are moved to experiment, it may be useful in this chapter to take a rapid survey of some of the more important manifestations of the dramatic spirit.

Beginnings

Something is known, much more is conjectured, concerning the first stirrings of the dramatic impulse. There seems little doubt that initially it was a religious impulse. Primitive man, confronted with the mysteries of the universe around him, dramatized his emotions in war-dances, in dances which evoked such blessings as he lacked and placated deities whose benevolence could not be taken for granted. What Sir James Frazer calls "sympathetic magic" might justly be described as the first manifestation of the drama in man. "If we analyse the principles of thought on which magic is based," writes Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, "they will probably be found to resolve themselves into two: first, that like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause, and, second, that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed. The former principle may be called the Law of Similarity, the latter the Law of Contact or Contagion. From the first of these principles, namely, the Law of Similarity, the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it, from the second he infers that whatever he does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact, whether it formed part of his body or not."

It is not difficult to perceive how these two laws operated, and a little consideration will soon reveal how intimately the drama is bound up with them. Primitive man staged many intimate dramas in which he was the sole actor, while witch doctors, medicine men, and priests produced many

others in which several actors took part. The Ojebway Indian who thrusts a needle into the heart of a wooden image, in the full and certain hope that by so doing he is inflicting an injury on the body of his enemy, performs an intensely dramatic pantomime for his own satisfaction, in which he is both actor and audience. When he goes that step further which involves the destruction of the image accompanied by a magic formula designed to bring about the death of his enemy, he bridges the gap between mime and drama by the utterance of the spoken word. And it must not be assumed that *any* words will serve so long as they are appropriate. No, only the right words are effective. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* is rich in specimens of the workings of this particular kind of magic, demonstrating that words and actions must be as exact in their expression as those which go to the making of more complex examples of the drama.

For instance, the Malayan will make an image of his victim from the parings of his nails, fragments of his hair, eyebrows, and spittle, these he combines with wax from a deserted bees' comb, and utters the following verse as he holds the figure over a lamp, for seven consecutive nights—

It is not wax that I am scorching,

It is the liver, heart, and spleen of So-and-so that I scorch

Only these words are presumed to be effective, and any modification of them would be as inadmissible as "gagging" in the performance of a play by Shakespeare.

An even more elaborate drama is performed by the Malayan, who makes a corpse of wax in representation of his enemy and then proceeds to pierce the eye of the image, thereby bringing about blindness. Not content with this, he pierces the stomach to produce sickness, then the head, to produce headache; then the breast, to produce suffering in the breast, and, finally, to put the finishing touch and kill his enemy outright, he transfixes the image from the head downwards, enshrouds it, prays over it as if it were

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a real corpse, and buries it in the path where the victim is bound to step over it. Make-believe goes a step further with the utterance of the words—

It is not I who am burying him,  
It is Gabriel who is burying him

In this way the crime is laid at the door of the wrong person in truly theatrical style

Although primitive man is peculiarly inventive when it comes to devising magical plots for securing the hurt or destruction of his enemies, his little dramas are not always malevolent in their aim. Ceremonies for procuring offspring, for hastening the growth of certain human faculties, and so forth, are common enough, while the natives of New Caledonia have a very elaborate method for restoring amity between an estranged man and wife. The first step in a very involved process is the tying together of two spindle-shaped bundles, one to represent the husband and the other the wife.

It will be found, too, that most primitive peoples have complicated ceremonies associated with hunting, war, and agriculture, particularly with the planting and harvesting of rice. Miming, dancing, mock-fighting, and the like accompany these ceremonies, which are at least as truly theatrical in essence as modern ballet.

### **Indian Drama**

It is, needless to say, a far cry from these elementary beginnings, scarcely self-conscious, to the almost over-systematized dramatic forms associated with some of the civilizations which preceded our own. The ancient Indian drama, for instance, was subjected to a system of docketing which many of us would probably find exasperating. The theorists classified dramatic moods and impressions into such categories as the Exotic, Comical, Pathetic, Tragic, Heroic, Awful, Hateful, and Miraculous, subdividing these broad classes indefinitely. By means of this process of

dissection they were able to tabulate forty-eight types of hero, three hundred and eighty-four female types, and many varieties of villain, comedian, confidant, and so forth. This is the barest indication of the elaborate theories upon which classic Hindu dramatic authors laid so much stress. The few examples of Indian drama known to us—*Sakuntala* and *The Toy Cart* are both available in English translations—seem to date from the sixth or seventh century A.D. Their charm is perennial and can be savoured without any knowledge of the apparently intricate technique which brought about their creation. To our Western way of thinking, the character-drawing is somewhat naive, and, if it is the fruit of an analytical method which acknowledges many hundreds of types of character, one can only regard the method with suspicion. The true dramatist's instinct is likely to be a sounder touchstone.

*Sakuntala* and *The Toy Cart* cannot, of course, have been India's first contribution to the drama, they are far too accomplished to be India's initial attempt to express itself in dramatic form. Although dates are always hard to assess where India is concerned, it can be safely assumed that the drama, in many different forms, flourished in that country long before the Christian era; but it seems to be unlikely that Indian drama preceded the Chinese.

### Chinese Drama

Some authorities state that the Chinese theatre existed, and in a far from elementary form, two thousand years before Christ; but there is little documentary evidence in support of this claim, and the clouds of uncertainty which obscure the subject are not conducive to an enlightened inquiry. The drama in China, as elsewhere, almost certainly had its origin in the need to objectify religious experience, many of the sacred plays known to students date from the Chou Dynasty, which began in the twelfth century before Christ, and there seems little doubt about the vitality of Chinese drama at least as far back as the eighth century B.C.



Tradition has always played an important role in Chinese development, the wheels of Chinese civilization have turned slowly, and catastrophic changes have rarely taken place. The great Chinese tradition, as it is still carried on, was inaugurated by the Emperor Ming Huang in the eighth century A D. He founded a dramatic college where, under his personal instruction, some hundreds of boys and girls were trained to play and sing for the entertainment of the Court. His pupils were called Students of the Emperor's Pear Garden—presumably because the performance took place in one of the gardens of the Imperial Palace—and this label is attached to actors in China to this day. The Emperor Ming Huang was possibly the very first “producer”, he personally directed his company of three hundred performers. But long before his time there had been theatrical performances in China, and there is a record of at least one stage play dating from the third century of our era.

Music plays an important, nay, an essential, part in Chinese drama. Untrained European ears cannot detect the great variety of styles of Chinese music, each of which has its own peculiar function, but any deviation from time-honoured observances in this matter would be regarded with disapproval by a Chinese audience. Words are not spoken as in European straight drama, but intoned at different pitches and with different registers of the voice. The Chinese orchestra—although it produces noises distasteful to European ears—is a complex and well-trained body of performers who use a considerable variety of instruments—drums, gongs, horns, cymbals, flutes, flageolets, and so on. The musicians are seated on the stage and apparently take no interest in the performance, they shift their positions, smoke, scratch their persons, and otherwise disport themselves as if neither audience nor actors were present. But this indifference is deceptive, for they accompany the words and the action of the play with the closest accuracy. Moreover, they play entirely from memory; for they have no music in front of them.

Stage scenery in Chinese plays is almost non-existent. A table, a chair or two, a few screens, a piece of cloth, a few pieces of bamboo are all that are required to suggest thrones, fortresses, houses, judgment seats, rivers, mountains, or anything else that may be necessary. The West has had an opportunity of seeing plays done in the Chinese manner—*The Yellow Jacket* is the most famous and probably the best of them, and also Mr S I Hsiung's translation of *Lady Precious Stream*, a condensed version of a famous folk play. By common consent it has been agreed that elaborate scenery, indeed scenery of any kind, is not absolutely essential to the presentation of a play, provided that the convention adopted for dispensing with it is either self-explanatory or known beforehand.

In contrast with this parsimoniousness in scenery is the extravagance in costume. The variety of dresses offered by the Chinese stage is almost unbelievable. There is a bewildering profusion of designs, materials, and colours, and there is nothing haphazard about their choice. Each costume is associated with a particular character or type of character, hats, caps, bonnets, and head-dresses of all kinds, to say nothing of hirsute adornments—beards, moustaches, wigs—are almost as complex and just as arbitrary. Moreover, masks, make-up, and weapons bear equal testimony not only to the inventive and artistic skill of the designers, but to the age-long tradition which has helped to build up the elaborate theatrical structure in which words, music, posture, movement, and costume combine to produce a united whole. The effect thus produced is apparently not easily assimilable by the European, but the perennial popularity of the theatre in China proves that it satisfies some fundamental psychological need.

It would appear that, generally speaking, the literary quality of Chinese plays is not very remarkable. The themes are naive, psychological development in the modern sense cannot be said to concern them, evil-doing is as certain to meet with punishment as virtue is to be rewarded.

The intense atmosphere inseparable from a well-produced play in a European theatre bears no resemblance to the cabaret-like atmosphere which prevails in the Chinese theatre, where food is consumed, chatting is unrestricted, hawkers sell their wares, and a constant stream of late-comers adds to the prevailing unrepose. Most of the plays are very long, and, being very familiar to the audience—which is chiefly interested in them as a vehicle for acting—they make no demands on the intellect. Beginning in the afternoon, they frequently last until the early hours of the next day, moreover, often one play after another is produced in succession without interruption.

A change of attitude towards the theatre in China is now taking place. There are certain theatres where greater restraint is observed by the audience. The auditorium in these theatres is in darkness, only the stage being illuminated, the audience is expected to be seated at a certain hour, and interruptions by late-comers are not tolerated, hawkers and other disturbers of the peace are not allowed, and in general something like the European attitude to the theatre is developing. My Chinese informant explained why hitherto so little respect has been shown to all the earlier scenes of a play. It appears that the "stars" never appeared until some hours after the opening of the show, lesser actors occupied the boards until the luminaries, who engaged them and paid them, were ready to make an impressive entrance before an audience which had been bored by their inferiors!

### Japanese Drama

The classic Chinese drama bore little or no relation to the classic Nō plays of Japan. The material trappings were not dissimilar; there was the same sparsity of scenery and the same insistence on elaborate costumes, and an even greater use of a most diverse and imaginative range of masks. The stage upon which these Nō plays were performed strongly resembled our own Elizabethan stage—a platform, with the audience spread round three sides of it—but there

the resemblance ends. The art of the Nō plays was in more senses than one aristocratic. It was towards the end of the fourteenth century A.D. that the Shogun Yoshimitsu invited one Kwanami, a priest, to his palace in Kioto, where he and his fellow priests developed the art of the Nō play—a play intimately associated with Shintoism, its philosophy and its legends. Nō plays became an integral part of all Court ceremonial, under the patronage of the nobility, youthful princes and nobles were encouraged to be present and forbidden to take part in the vulgar realistic theatrical performances which were reserved for the common people.

Nō plays, although the source of their inspiration was religious, and although in the first place they were performed only by priests, were not exclusively devoted to the service of religion. The aesthetic pleasure to be derived from them was not the least important of their attributes. They were aristocratic, too, in their austerity and in their assumption of erudition in the audience. The complex symbolism, the postures and gestures based on formulas which only the initiated could understand, together with the allusive character of the text, resulted in an eclectic art which was inevitably restricted in its appeal. The actors who played in Nō plays took their calling very seriously, as befitted association with an art whose roots were in Buddhism. The word “Nō” means “accomplishment,” and is thus related to our own word *drama*; and it is perhaps not irrelevant to stress, at the risk of digressing, my conviction that the primary essential of drama is now, as ever, *the thing done*—action, rather than the thing said.

A theatrical convention which links up Japanese classic drama with Greek drama is the institution of the chorus, but its function in these two instances was by no means identical. The Japanese chorus, which was sung or intoned, commented on the scene enacted and interpreted it to the audience, whereas in Greek drama the chorus carried on the action, providing links which were not implicit in the action seen on the stage.

## Greek Drama

The mind, moving from the oriental scene to that of ancient Greece, has a sensation of expansion and escape. The austere beauty, the religious significance, the fidelity to an honourable tradition, which characterize the Eastern theatre evoke our admiration, but on the whole they do not imbue us with a desire to imitate, whereas all we know or conjecture about the Greek theatre stimulates emulation and a wish to revive its ancient glories in our midst. The centuries have luckily not deprived us of all the masterpieces of Greek dramatic literature. We are not compelled to accept on trust the glory that was Greece, as we are, for the most part, compelled to accept the literary splendour of the antique East. Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes are not merely names to us—they are the authors of plays which are familiar to us, not only in print but in recent stage productions. Nevertheless, our pleasure in the performance of a Greek tragedy or comedy played within the four walls of a modern theatre, however ingeniously adapted to the physical circumstances of modern times, must fall far short of the thrill experienced by the Athenians when they witnessed the masterpieces of Greek drama in their original setting—

Taking place in the open air, on the sunny slope of a hill, valley and plain or islanded sea stretching away below to meet the blazing blue of a cloudless sky, the moving pageant, thus from the first set in tune with nature, brought to a focus of splendour the rays of every separate art. More akin to an opera than to a play, it had, as its basis, music. For the drama had developed out of the lyric ode, and retained throughout what was at first its only element, the dance and song of a mimetic chorus. By this centre of rhythmic motion and pregnant melody the burden of the tale was caught up and echoed and echoed again, as the living globe divided into spheres of answering song, the clear and precise significance of the play, never obscure to the head, being thus brought home in music to the passion of the heart, the idea embodied

in lyric verse, the verse transfigured by song, and song and verse reflected as in a mirror to the eye by the swing and beat of the limbs they stirred to consonance of motion (LOWES DICKINSON *The Greek View of Life*)

It is hardly necessary to say that religion was the force behind Greek drama. The festival of Dionysus was celebrated with passionate devotion by the Greeks. It was a communal expression of thanksgiving and desire for agricultural fertility. The elaborate processions and ritual, in which everybody took part, necessitated a vast open space and an altar, dancing, declamation of verse, and, later, a certain amount of dialogue, led by gradual but inevitable stages to the Greek theatre as we think of it. Our mind conjures up a great arena capable of seating as many as twenty or thirty thousand persons, with a huge stage whose architectural dignity was only in after years disfigured by inessentials, here we behold, with our mind's eye, actors wearing high stilt-like boots to give them abnormal height, their faces are covered by masks whose lines and planes are ingeniously designed to carry significance to an enormous audience spread over a vast area, their voices are augmented by a kind of megaphonic mouthpiece incorporated in their masks, and they express themselves with dignified, non-realistic gestures, they have the appearance of heroic sculpture come to life.

When it is remembered that the themes of the plays performed—religious, legendary, historical—were familiar to the audience in advance, that the dramatist was a genius who possessed the power to express the emotions of the people, that a theatrical performance was not an entertainment sponsored by a commercial syndicate but a civic event in which everybody was expected to take part (even poverty was not admitted as a reason for non-attendance, free tickets were provided for the poor), it will be realized that at no time in the history of the world has the theatre played a more important role in the civic life of the people than it played in ancient Greece. It was not until late in the fifth

century B C that the classic Greek theatre showed signs of decline; that great genius, Euripides, being the probable cause of the break-away from classical tradition

### Roman Drama

Just as Greece almost certainly derived much of its inspiration from Crete, where, at Phaistos, an auditorium and a stage for spectacle appears to have existed *circa* 2200-2100 B C, though unhappily no example of Cretan drama has come down to us, so did Rome inherit the fruits of Greek achievement

The changes wrought by the Romans in the physical structure of the theatre were many and interesting, and they show the tendency which led finally to the so-called realistic theatre of nineteenth-century Europe, but, broadly speaking, the Roman period showed the theatre in its decadence. The Romans do not appear to have been specially interested in drama, the dramatic literature which survives from that time cannot stand comparison with the amazing richness and depth of the Greek drama, while the theatre itself, which under the Greeks had been a dignified institution dedicated to religion and the communal life of the people, and had been one of the major activities of the State itself, gradually fell from its high estate. The fact that actors under Roman law lost their civic rights is evidence of the deterioration which had set in. Although Greek plays were performed, they were radically altered and made the excuse for lavish spectacle, sponsored not by the State but, as in the later years of Greek sway, by wealthy citizens. It is recorded that a temporary theatre was built in Rome by one plutocrat, Acmius Scaurus to seat 80,000 persons! Purple carpets are said to have covered the floors, while in the scenic background there were nearly four hundred pillars and three thousand statues. This gigantic edifice met its end in a fire brought about by its owner's slaves.

In Rome, Aristophanic comedy, itself broad enough, degenerated into much cruder, coarser farce, in which the

theme of marital infidelity predominated. It is not surprising that the religious impulse, to which the theatre owes its very conception, should have revolted against the base uses which its offspring had begun to serve. In the first year of the Christian era a conflict between religion and the theatre sprang up, and it cannot be said to have altogether subsided even to-day—but to pursue this point here would be to stray too far from my immediate purpose. However, it was not the Church which destroyed the theatre in Rome, so deep-rooted was the love of spectacle in the Romans that the strongest disapproval on the part of the Roman pagans or Christians was not able to dislodge it. It was the Goths, and later the Germans, who—in their determination to suppress every manifestation of the Southern temperament—succeeded in destroying the theatre.

### European Medieval Drama

After the decline of the Roman theatre, Europe passed through a period when the theatre as an institution seems to have ceased to exist. So far as the drama was concerned, the Dark Ages were dark indeed: there are no remnants of anything which could be dignified by such a label. But the dramatic impulse itself did not die. There are, it is true, no records of plays, but the acting instinct was kept alive by folk festivals and other festivals, generally associated with periods of agricultural significance, such as spring and autumn, and out of these was born the Medieval drama: the Miracle Plays, or Mysteries, and the Moralities. It cannot be claimed that these competed with the ancient Greek or Eastern dramas, either in artistic subtlety or in technical sophistication, but they possessed many human qualities, humorous and emotional, which gave them a vitality denied to much more refined work.

Like the Greek, though in a different way, the Medieval stage was intimately identified with the life of the people, and no historian desirous of investigating the habits and customs of the common people, their approach to religion



and to the affairs of the day, to their work and to their employers, to their lords and masters, can afford to neglect an examination of the innumerable Medieval plays of which we have records. At first it was the clergy and the choristers who concerned themselves as performers and arrangers of these Mysteries and Miracle plays, but later on the laity participated, and in due course they became a genuine expression of the popular mentality. The populace was not, as in Greece, gathered into vast auditoriums to enjoy spectacles arranged by the State, spectacles in the choice and production of which they had no say, it was itself vitally concerned in the writing, in the arranging, and in the acting of the plays, as well as in witnessing them.

The origin of these plays, needless to say, was religion. They started as liturgical plays, given at the Christian festivals of Christmas, Easter, and so on, and were mainly consecrated to the Nativity, the Passion, and the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. There is a record in Matthew Paris of a Miracle play shown at Dunstable as early as 1100, representations of the sufferings of the saints and the miracles of the confessors are referred to by Fitzstephen in his life of Thomas à Becket (1183), Miracle plays were identified with the feast of Corpus Christi after its establishment by Pope Urban IV in 1264. According to Sir E. K. Chambers (*The Medieval Stage*) there was a reference to a theatre in Exeter as long ago as 1348. In 1402 there was a temporary stage set up in the great dormitory of the Hôpital de la Trinité in Paris by the Brothers of the Passion. But two hundred years earlier than that the German Benedictine nun, Roswitha (Helene von Rossov), had lived, whose work has secured for her a permanent place in the history of European drama. Born in about the year 930, she died at the opening of the eleventh century. Her talent—which was carefully fostered by the Convent of Gandersheim—expressed itself in many forms, including epics, legends, and six dramas. The dramas, of which there are several English translations, are written on the model of Terence, but they

are extremely didactic in character and are undoubtedly a foreshadowing of the Mysteries and Morality plays which were to follow so many years later

The Mysteries, properly so called, treated of Biblical subjects only, the Miracle plays taking on the legendary subjects, but this rigidity of classification has not always been abided by Religion and morality were behind the impulse which brought them into existence, but religion and morality were not strong enough to hold them confined within their original bounds Buffoonery and blasphemy—of a crude and thoughtless order, rather than deliberate irreverence—were soon mixed up with good words and pious aims

Moralities followed the Mysteries and Miracle plays, and were the most immediate link with the more sophisticated drama which came to birth with the separation of drama and church The Biblical personages eventually yielded place to allegorical characters such as the Virtues, the Vices, and such qualities as Discretion, Strength, Good Deeds, and the like This was probably the crude beginning of the scarcely less crude melodrama of the nineteenth century, in which virtue and vice were as broadly differentiated under the names of Tom Brighteyes and Sir Jasper as if they had been more honestly called "Good" and "Evil"

Mysteries and Moralities flourished not only in England, but in many parts of Europe—in France, Spain, Germany, Italy, Scandinavia, the Lowlands—and a whole literature has been written about them Every considerable town in England, to speak of one country alone, seems to have been identified with not only one but many plays, written and performed by the local population The records are necessarily incomplete after five hundred or six hundred years, but even so they are impressive The surviving Wakefield plays number more than thirty, the York nearly fifty, the Chester plays some twenty-five It is said that in 1411 a play called *From the Beginning of the World* was played at the Kinner's Well in London, lasting seven days

Played in the market-places, before the churches, and in other suitable places where a concourse of people could be accommodated, these Morality plays, offspring of liturgical drama, were an integral part of the life of the people, closely identified with their religious and social beliefs and prejudices, and prepared the way for the great literary drama which afterwards flowered so abundantly in the Elizabethan era. The text of a large number of these plays has survived. In most cases it cannot be claimed that strictness of form or niceness of expression has been observed. There is a Gothic waywardness about most of them, as there was about the way in which they were presented to the public; but many of them are altogether admirable, judged by any standard. Vigour, humour, pathos, and dramatic force are present in many of them, and one of them, *Everyman*, the English Morality play which is said to be probably of Dutch origin, is a masterpiece of the first order.

This book is not a history, and it would be supererogatory if I now proceeded to trace in detail the course of European drama since its renaissance. I evoke the names of Shakespeare, his immediate predecessors and contemporaries in England; of Molière, Racine, and Corneille, of Vondel, of Goldoni, of Calderon, of the Restoration playwrights, of Congreve, Wycherley, Dryden, and their merry men; of Sheridan and Goldsmith, of Goethe and Schiller—shining links in an endless chain—and pass on. The brief, and very far from exhaustive, survey of the major manifestations of the dramatic impulse contained in this chapter will have served its chief purpose if it has removed any doubts which had lingered in the reader's mind concerning the flexibility of the art of the drama. Dogmas in art, as in religion, are permissible only in so far as they are an aid to enlightenment, when they come to be regarded as an end in themselves—as a set of arbitrary rules and regulations by which a work of art must stand or fall—the time has come to discard them.

## CHAPTER III

### A CO-OPERATIVE ART

NO handbook, rules, prohibitions, examples, or hard work will make a playwright of one who was born without the dramatic instinct, and no one devoid of the dramatic instinct can ever hope to derive much pleasure from seeing a play. Given the instinct (and most human beings have been so endowed in varying degrees), the would-be playwright may gain much profit from examining the principles which inspired the work of dramatists who have succeeded in their art, even though the scrutiny should lead to his scorning their principles and disregarding their practice, while the theatregoer who does not aspire to become a playwright may find his appreciation of theatrical art enhanced by a knowledge of the technique which lies behind it. The playwright of genius is unlikely to tread carefully in the paths made by his predecessors, almost inevitably he will sooner or later find a way of his own, and, if he has anything worth saying to say, will proceed by trial and error until he achieves his goal by inventing the technique most congenial to his particular mentality. If he is born under a lucky star, his stumbling will be forgiven him because of his genius. The would-be playwright whose talent falls short of genius, however, will not be forgiven his blunders. The least that will be expected of him is a reasonably close acquaintance with the canons and limitations of his art, some of which I now propose to discuss.

It should always be borne in mind that the drama, unlike other "creative" arts, is very largely dependent upon a number of factors completely outside the control of the artist. A painter sees his picture exactly as he has painted it. For good or ill, it is his own unaided work, no other personality intrudes between the creation and its creator. As he is painting he can watch the progress of his work, shape it

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and change it, and finally bring it to a completion which, whatever its shortcoming, is what he alone has accomplished. Even the composer of music has a fairly close control of his medium, and, although one interpretation of his work may differ from another, the range of possible variation is more or less fixed by an immutable notation and a system of markings which can be as lavish or as meagre as the composer desires. The novelist is even more fortunate, distributing his work, exactly as it leaves his pen, to an audience limited only by his failure to appeal.<sup>1</sup> The writer of plays is far less happily circumstanced, and the aspiring dramatist would be well advised at an early stage to envisage some of the limitations that hedge his craft about.

### **The Human Element**

To start with, the most important part of his medium is that unknown quantity, the human being. It is safe to say that, except in those cases where parts have been written especially for particular actors, and not always even in those cases, no playwright has ever had the joy of seeing a character played precisely as he conceived it. Unlike the novelist, whose characters are fixed for ever in his mind, the playwright must be prepared to see the creatures of his imagination in some degree distorted, however intelligently the actors interpret the parts. The more vividly he has imagined a character, the more exactly he has endowed it with an infinite variety of attributes, the more likely is he to be shocked when he sees it played. Physically, the actor will falsify his inward vision, the actor's voice will inevitably seem unfamiliar to his inward ear, the actor's personality, however skilfully adapted, will only approximately resemble the personality of the character as he, the author, conceived it. Perhaps the broad conception will not be widely different, a noble-minded, straight-limbed, well-tubbed young Englishman will not be transformed into a shady, crooked, and grubby dwarf; a young and slender heroine of flawless beauty is not likely to be played by a heavyweight

with no physical graces, but all those innumerable little touches which an author lavishes on his creations—little delicacies of inflexion and attitude, subtleties of gesture, significant pauses, and changes of tempo—will only rarely be achieved in production.

The result of this incertitude is not always and necessarily bad. Every dramatist must have had the experience of seeing his work occasionally improved upon by an actor who has read into a part more than the author put into it. An actress once transformed a character in one of my plays so completely that it was hardly recognizable. A babbling, breathless, good-hearted but inconsequent half-wit became a languid, cynical, spiteful *demi-mondaine*—and this without changing a word of the text. The character thus transmogrified was so amusing and effective that I had not the courage to insist that the actress should abandon her own conception of the part and return to mine, lest in an attempt to eradicate her own reading of the role and substitute mine she should only succeed in giving a muddy and uncertain interpretation. Playgoers as well as playwrights must often feel that there is a discrepancy between a part as written and a part as played. This is one of the perils of playwrighting over which the playwright has relatively little control.

Nevertheless, the practice of writing parts for particular actors is open to very serious practical and artistic objections. Practical, because, except in the rarest and most favoured cases, a dramatist cannot command the services of a particular actor even for his leading role, and it would be a piece of incredibly good luck if he had the services of a whole company at his disposal. Even repertory companies, like the late Miss Horniman's company at the pre-War Gaiety Theatre, Manchester, or Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theatre, or the Irish Players when they were banded together at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, or the companies held together in many National Theatres by such material advantages as regular salaries and pensions, are only relatively permanent. Their personnel is in a state of flux, one season's

company differs substantially from the next, the powers and characteristics of individual actors change, and not necessarily for the better, and even actors, like other mortals, grow older with the passage of years. Practically, then, a play can be written for only one actor or perhaps a couple, leaving the rest of the cast to the fortunes of theatrical hazard. This is perhaps as well, for artistically the practice of fitting a character to an actor is almost indefensible, and is to be recommended only to playwrights whose gift for creating character is so slender that it needs the personality or peculiarities of a particular actor to stimulate it. Playwrights tempted to invent characters which would display the genius of a Marie Tempest, a John Gielgud, an Yvonne Printemps, a Sybil Thorndike, a Nelson Keys, an Elisabeth Bergner should bear in mind that there is only one Marie Tempest, one John Gielgud, one Yvonne Printemps, one Sybil Thorndike, one Nelson Keys, and one Elisabeth Bergner, and that their inability to appreciate his play is almost tantamount to a complete failure, for a role specially adapted to the personality and genius of one actor is more than likely to be lifeless when interpreted by another.

### **Physical Setting**

Secondly, although, in ideal conditions, the setting of a play may conform almost exactly with the intentions of the author, conditions are so rarely ideal that one must be prepared to accept a compromise. The room which has existed in the author's mind during the process of creation will probably only very superficially resemble the room which the scene-painter and stage carpenter place before him at the dress rehearsal. The mountains, glaciers, caverns, and hill-tops which have served as the background to the author's imagination, inspiring him to higher and higher flights, will take on entirely different appearances as soon as they have been fitted to the limitations of a given stage by a scenic artist with his own personality to express and the exchequer of the theatre to consider. In other words, the

author must keep his visual imagination fluid, insisting on his minimum, when the day for planning a production arrives, and thanking God fasting if he comes within sight of his ideal

### The Producer

Thirdly, between the author and the play looms the producer. Now, the producer in the modern theatre plays almost as important a part as the financial backer himself. The backer may, and generally does, determine the policy of the theatre, but, the play once chosen and the piper paid, it is the producer who calls the tune, and no dictator could be more dictatorial than the average producer. The author, if sufficiently prominent, or lucky, will be consulted about the cast, and may, if he unites pluck with luck, have some chance of expressing an opinion at rehearsals, but his power of veto is somewhat academic, his knowledge of the resources available is in most cases strictly limited, his mood, moreover, is usually one of such abject gratitude that his play should be performed at all that his *moral* deteriorates when confronted by the superior stamina of the producer. Everything conspires to convince the playwright that his work is not wanted, so that, when the miracle happens and he finds himself with a signed contract in his hand, his humility is apt to be boundless. Mr James Bridie, one of the few British dramatists whose work is both intellectually stimulating and acceptable to the general public, wrote in *The London Mercury* (September, 1937)—

I amused myself the other day by making a list of seventy British dramatists whose work could not be denied worth or quality. They are all capable craftsmen. No adult person would feel ashamed to have spent a couple of hours watching an entertainment contrived by them. None of them is in Hollywood. None of them is represented on the London stage. I am willing to bet that none of them would object to having a play by him performed in a "first-class manner in a



West End theatre " Apart from its financial advantages that experience is one of the greatest delights in life Have they all dried up? Have they offered plays and had them rejected? Have they ever been asked for plays? To the last question I think it is possible to answer "No " It is a fine English tradition that the dramatist must hawk his wares He has not yet attained to the dignity of a shopkeeper

But granted almost ideal conditions—a cultured and considerate manager and a producer anxious to meet the wishes of the author—the extent to which the latter can effectively co-operate is determined by all manner of adventitious circumstances His choice of a cast is circumscribed not only by the existence of suitable actors—though that is limitation enough!—but by the financial resources of the management, by the availability of the actors chosen at the period required, by their willingness, if free, to act in the same company—for the personal relations between actors are not necessarily friendly!—and by many other possibly trivial, certainly irritating, considerations. For instance, attached to most theatres there are certain actors and actresses who seem to have a divine right to jobs and often lay what appear to be undeniable claims to leading roles Indeed, the difficulties of casting can scarcely be over-estimated

But, even if the cast is an ideal one, the producer will not necessarily handle it in a way which commends itself to the author Most producers—and rightly—have theories of their own which they wish to exploit, tricks of production which they wish to try out, new ideas about lighting, a scene designer with novel notions, and the like, and although all these factors may be intensely interesting in themselves and completely convincing, they tend to remove the play farther and farther away from the author's control, leaving him in the end almost as detached an onlooker as the dramatic critic who judges the play by its performance on the first night, unaware whether the production is true or false to the playwright's conception

## The Audience

Fourthly, an even more important collaborator than the producer, the actor, and the scene-designer is the audience. It is self-evident that a play does not rightly exist until it is produced on the stage of a theatre, it is scarcely less axiomatic that a play does not exist in the fullest sense until it has been played before an audience. Those who claim that the plays of Shakespeare are better read in the study than seen in the theatre would have got no support from Shakespeare himself, who was a man of the theatre, anxious and able to exploit the peculiar characteristics of the theatre. An ideal performance of a play by Shakespeare would offer something fuller, and more Shakespearian, than any solitary reading, however sensitive the reader. No playwright has ever been more aware than Shakespeare of the important part which an audience plays in the production of a play. His works provide ample evidence of his awareness of the subtle psychological bond which links performers with public and determines in what degree a production is successful or not. Indeed, the chief aim of the producer's art is to calculate the effect which certain factors—actions, movements, inflexions, tricks of lighting, timings, silences, and a myriad others—will have upon an audience, and, until these have been tried out and have succeeded, the work of the producer cannot be said to have passed the test.

The art of the theatre is largely the art of "making an effect," and presupposes an audience. If *rapprochement* between players and public is not established soon after the rise of the curtain, the play is in danger of never coming to life. A dramatist may sometimes be forgiven if he allows his play to sag somewhere in the middle, so long as he is successful in tightening it up and providing a taut last act, but lack of grip in the opening scene is fatal and cannot hope for forgiveness from an audience craving illusion. Remembering the variability of audiences, and their incomprehensible uncertainty—enthusiastically alive to-day and inevitably

dead to-morrow, as if their moods were subject to the phases of the moon and the coursing of the stars—we shall not fail to recognize the importance of their contribution to the dramatist's art. An audience is not interested in intentions; it judges by results and ought not to be asked to "make allowances." It has no time for reflection until the curtain descends; it has every right to demand, therefore, that effects, however subtle, should not be ambiguous. Whatever esoteric meanings may be there for subsequent discovery, they must carry a face-value meaning which is not subsequently denied. This is not to demand that plays should be simple and obvious; it is to demand that a dramatist should present his difficult ideas so skilfully that they are immediately comprehended so far as their surface significance is concerned, leaving further reflection to come with the fall of the curtain. A good play will leave an audience emotionally satisfied, even though it be intellectually unconvinced; reflection may or may not lead to intellectual conviction, but so long as an audience is not conscious of having been deceived in its emotional and aesthetic reactions, it will be willing to accept and applaud a good play whatever its intellectual content.

From all this it is clear that the drama is a co-operative art, in which the author plays an important but by no means the only part. It may be said with some justice that he plays the only essential part, without him the rest of the factors would not be called into action. A play can exist without the other factors. The other factors cannot exist without a play. This is an academic truth which nobody will deny, but it will offer little consolation to the playwright thirsting for recognition. An author who wishes to control the expression of his art, who shrinks from the contaminating touch of other artists, who cannot brook interference with his conception or admit on occasion that another view of his idea may be sounder than his own, should leave the drama alone; he will thereby save himself much irritation, despair, and heart-ache. But, once the importance of

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the four collaborators with the author—actor, scene-designer, producer, and audience—is admitted and honourably accepted, the would-be playwright may proceed to consider some of the principles which go to the making of a play

## CHAPTER IV

### SOME GENERAL PRINCIPLES

#### The Unities

A PLAY, like any other work of art, must be a harmonious whole, however diverse its parts, they must be so related that an effect of unity is produced. The modern dramatist does not trouble himself about the Aristotelian "unities" of time and space, which decreed that the action of a play should be continuous and the scene constant, and, indeed, the practice of the Greeks themselves only superficially adhered to them. Unity of a more important and less obvious order is demanded, depending on a nice sense of proportion and a just feeling for what is relevant. It is not necessarily much concerned with the division of a play into accurately measured acts—a play can be in one, two, three, four, or five acts, or in a series of scenes of odd lengths, and either succeed or fail in attaining unity. Mr. Bernard Shaw's *Getting Married* is not divided into acts or scenes at all, its action is continuous and its setting unchanging, and if it achieves an effect of unity it is not because of these material considerations but because the emotional and intellectual content are so welded that the audience is not conscious of any irrelevancies. A play may faithfully observe exact continuity of time and be set in an unchanging scene, and yet be so full of incongruities—unconvincing characterization, illogical development, arbitrary situations—that an effect of unity is completely lacking. On the other hand, the action of a play may dodge about in time and space without detracting from its artistic unity. Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, for instance, follows its hero's chequered course from boyhood to manhood, using a technique which is a compound of realism, fantasy, mysticism, and satire, arbitrarily distributed, without "bridge passages" to modulate

from one mood to the next, and yet, because of the author's consistency of vision, unity is attained

Unity, then, is not a thing that can be acquired and applied like a rule of algebra, it is a mental or spiritual quality, dependent for its attainment upon the sensitiveness and artistic conscience of the author. Actions or speeches dragged into a play in order to make an effect not inherent in the development of the theme destroy its unity, and fantasy and farce are no less subject to this rule than so-called realistic drama. If five minutes' fidelity to real life were arbitrarily introduced into a farce in which up till then everything had been deliberately put out of register in order to create a humorous unreal world where all the values were distorted, the illusion—and therefore the unity—would be as irrevocably killed as if five minutes of farcical behaviour were inserted into the texture of a play intended to reveal life as it is. The apparent irrelevancies of farce must be as carefully selected as the superficially more logical action, or they will destroy the flow essential to a successful specimen of the genre. The waywardness of fantasy is only apparent, not real, it follows laws of its own, but they are *laws*, not caprices. There is no inconsequence about Housman's and Granville-Barker's *Prunella*, or about *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

## Conflict

All arts have their dogmas. The drama is beset by them, and if the high panjandrums who invent or reiterate them could have their way, the drama would become one of the most rigid and limited of arts instead of what it is by nature, one of the most fluid and diverse. Perhaps the most persistently repeated dictum of all is that drama, all drama, is conflict. Brunetière was probably the first to utter it, but it has been echoed over and over again by people who have never heard of that distinguished French critic. It is only a half-truth. Many famous plays exemplify it, as many

more give it the lie. It may perhaps be said that in every play there are bound to be various currents which run counter to one another, but frequently they do so in the sense in which themes in a musical composition run counter to one another, touching at different points and producing, not conflict, but harmony. Presumably no play exists in which the characters steer a course entirely free from obstacles, but an obstacle may be a passive object, an inert enemy, while "conflict" implies at least two opposing forces. Therefore, to deny the right of existence to plays which are not based on conflict is to set up an arbitrary and stultifying limitation to the scope of the drama. Conflict in drama holds a place similar to that held by dissonance in music. Conflict is one of many elements in drama, as dissonance is one of many elements in music.

The most that can be justly claimed is that conflict probably determines the course of more plots than any other single relationship, but it would be as untrue to say that drama cannot exist unless based on conflict as it would be to maintain that all conflict is drama. A quarrel on the stage, as in life, may be an extremely tedious and undramatic affair, while ten minutes of carefully pointed dialogue, in which there is no hint of conflict, may be intensely dramatic, as the plays of Bernard Shaw abundantly testify.

Who would think, taking it on its surface value, that the following passage from Somerset Maugham's *The Circle* was rich in the stuff of drama?—

LADY KITTY I'm absolutely lost without my lip-stick. Lend me yours, darling, will you?

ELIZABETH I'm awfully sorry. I'm afraid I haven't got one.

LADY KITTY Do you mean to say you don't use a lip-stick?

ELIZABETH Never.

The drama implicit in this interchange of remarks is brought out by the circumstances surrounding them. Elizabeth, bored by her husband and by the restricted conventional

life which she is forced to live with him in his exquisite country house, is contemplating an elopement with Teddy Luton, an attractive he-man, the manager of a rubber estate in the Federated Malay States. Lady Kitty is the mother of Elizabeth's husband. Lady Kitty, too, long years ago, became bored by her husband, and she ran away with Lord Porteous in a spirit of high romance, then she was a fresh young thing, as fresh as Elizabeth herself. Now, thirty-five years later, she is a raddled, painted hag with dyed hair, dissolute and stupid, with only the faded and tawdry shreds of romance still clinging about her. Remembering these facts, the scrap of dialogue quoted above takes on intense dramatic significance.

Drama may show one man in antagonism to another, or one idea in antagonism to another, or man in conflict with the State, or in conflict with the world, or, Hamlet-like, in conflict with himself—but it may also show—and be no less dramatic in the showing—man progressing from one state of mind to another, from one emotional state to another, it can show man passing from ignorance to knowledge, from foolishness to wisdom, it can picture phases of society humorously, vindictively, satirically, or approvingly, and can pillory the foibles and stupidities of the age by showing them the reflection of themselves, it can inspire by depicting heroism in which the element of conflict has no place or a love passage unmarred by differences that is as dramatic and as stimulating as a passage of arms.

Conflict, then, although often an important ingredient of drama, is not an essential ingredient. It has played far too prominent a part in the French school of drama and in the work of English dramatists inspired by that school. Conflict in its more subtle manifestations may provide many interesting themes, unfortunately some of our more successful playwrights, obscurely aware of the need for conflict in their work, seem to imagine that technical honour is satisfied if they dramatize a series of squabbles separated by scenes of dubious reconciliation.



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## Action

“Actions speak louder than words” is almost a truism in the theatre, but the word “action” as it concerns the drama has been much misunderstood. It is true that drama without action is almost a contradiction in terms. A play in which nothing happened would be unthinkable, a play in which there were long stretches of inaction would be undramatic and boring. Drama, as I have already said, is by its very definition *the thing done*. But it must not be assumed that this implies an uninterrupted series of movements. Action does not necessarily mean, as it is sometimes alleged to mean by rule-of-thumb theoreticians, physical action. Complete immobility can be intensely dramatic, while physical movement is often utterly lacking in any sort of dramatic significance. Physical movement on the stage should be used sparingly—much more sparingly, indeed, than it is used in real life, where it is shamefully squandered. So many of our movements in daily life are aimless and our gestures meaningless. Watch people at home, in a restaurant, in the street, or in a railway carriage, and you will be amazed by the physical restlessness which characterizes many of them. Their hands fidget, they pat their hair, not because it needs attention but involuntarily, from sheer restlessness; they finger their faces, adjust their clothing, cross and uncross their legs, they move from one place to another for no apparent reason and indulge in gestures which seem to bear no relation to what they are saying or thinking. The psycho-analyst would no doubt be able to deduce peculiar and illuminating facts from all these apparently inconsequent activities; but, as the average member of an audience has no skill in psycho-analysis and accepts every action on its face value, the actor who makes a movement which appears to lead nowhere, or employs a gesture which does not immediately convey a recognizable meaning, is not merely wasteful in his technique—he is actively misleading. If, in real life, a man scratches his head, beats a tattoo with his fingers on the table, or fidgets in one of the

hundred ways in which human beings display their lack of repose, we do not necessarily or even probably ask ourselves "Now why did he do that?" But if an actor in a play performs any of these little apparently unconsidered acts we at once look for a meaning, consciously or subconsciously. If he scratches his head, it is because he is puzzled, if he taps on the table, it is because something has irritated him, and so on. We assume that everything an actor does is deliberately done.

It will be seen, then, that physical action on the stage must be used with exactitude and discretion. A meaningless movement is not merely useless, it is positively harmful and destructive of continuity. The trivial, apparently insignificant, gesture which is really a key to character or an indication of dramatic development must be left largely to the actor or the producer. A dramatist must not litter his script with so many directions that they tend to confuse the actor, but nowadays he is expected to supply a certain number of useful directions, and the practices of such good craftsmen as Somerset Maugham and John Galsworthy are worth studying in this connexion. Sometimes it is possible to give a valuable hint of character at the very opening of a play by some small but carefully pointed movement. When the curtain rises on Maugham's *The Circle*, Arnold Champion-Cheney, whose appearance is described as intellectual, but somewhat bloodless, calls "Elizabeth!" He goes to the window and calls again. He then rings the bell—

While he is waiting he gives a look round the room. He slightly alters the position of one of the chairs. He takes an ornament from the chimney-piece and blows the dust from it.

Almost unconsciously we know from this behaviour, coupled with the appearance of the man, that Arnold is likely to be finicky, a stickler for "good form" and the gentlemanly attributes, fussy, and difficult. Even if we do not deduce as much as this, our minds will have been prepared for such

development of the character as the author afterwards shows us

Continuity is a word which has been used before in these pages and will no doubt be used again, for it relates to one of the essential attributes of dramatic art. However broken-up the action of a play may be, the dramatic thread, like the thread of life itself, must remain intact or theatrical suicide will be committed. Drifting in a play is not permitted. The author must not only know which way he is going, he must also persuade the audience that he knows. Once an author fumbles or shows any kind of uncertainty, his hold on the audience is relaxed, the temperature drops immediately, and, however carefully the atmosphere has been created, it inevitably begins to disintegrate. An audience is always loath to give second chances. Once the element of scepticism creeps in, it is apt to grow with devastating rapidity. A playwright cannot afford to be tentative, he must be convinced and he must carry conviction. When the curtain falls on an act or a scene, or when a black-out brings about a pause in the physical action, the complex of emotions or ideas which the dramatist has aroused in his audience must go on working—perhaps unconsciously, perhaps below the surface—so that when the time comes for the curtain to rise again, the public's mind is alert and expectant. Indeed, it might almost be said that the real action of a play takes place in the mind of the spectator.

Dramatic action, then, does not invariably imply physical movement, although physical movement is sometimes involved in it. If John crosses to the window for no ostensible reason, the movement may be necessary for stage-grouping or for some other presumably legitimate purpose known to the producer, but if no idea or emotion is conveyed to the audience, it has nothing to do with dramatic action. If, however, John, having just confessed that he is bankrupt, crosses to the window in such a way as to awaken in the audience's mind the thought that he is about to throw himself out, that is dramatic action, because it carries the

emotional plot one step further. If Jane, accused of murder, stands transfixed and speechless, that very immobility is dramatic action, expressing innocence or guilt as the author, with the aid of the actress, decrees. A phrase which carries the plot one step further is action, a phrase which leaves the situation where it was is not. A couple of pages suffice to enable *The Circle* to get well under way. The physical action which takes place during these first two or three minutes is relatively unimportant, people come and go, but their coming and going does not reveal much of the drama, that is shown in a few pointed phrases. Arnold arouses attention by saying, after having shown some agitation—

Something very tiresome has happened

We are left in suspense while some other necessary information is conveyed to us. Then he throws out another remark which is obviously intended to be a bombshell—

My father's here,

producing the required effect of shock upon the other characters on the stage, and leaving the audience in the dark, but curious; then follows a series of revealing and amusing speeches from which we learn that the arrival of Arnold's father is very inopportune because it is undesirable that he should meet certain other people who are coming to lunch. Who these other people are we do not know for some time, but the dialogue is amusing and informative, and we are well disposed to enjoy the tension. The action is carried a step further—

ARNOLD: I knew it was silly to have them here. Elizabeth insisted

ELIZABETH: After all, she is your mother, Arnold

The surprise of this revelation persists during the next few speeches—

ARNOLD: That meant precious little to her when she went away. You can't imagine it means very much to me now

ELIZABETH It's thirty years ago It seems so absurd to bear malice after all that time

ARNOLD I don't bear malice, but the fact remains that she did me the most irreparable harm I can find no excuse for her

ELIZABETH Have you ever tried to?

ARNOLD My dear Elizabeth, it's no good going over all that again

And then the whole situation is made clear in a flash and the audience may sit back and wait for the story to unfold itself—

ARNOLD The facts are lamentably simple She had a husband who adored her, a wonderful position, all the money she could want, and a child of five And she ran away with a married man

The physical action that has taken place up to this point in the play has been relatively little and for the development of the plot unimportant, but dramatic action has been taking place all the time

In brief, dramatic action is the movement from one mental or emotional state to another, and no play, however quiet, however lyrical, however spectacular, can exist without it But the means whereby dramatic action may be achieved are many and various—by physical movement or physical inertia, by speech or silence; by a change of scene, or by a change of lighting, or even by the inflexion of a voice.

## CHAPTER V

### THE WELL-MADE PLAY (I)

#### **The Essentials**

THIS chapter is concerned primarily with what has come to be regarded as the well-made play, the play, that is to say, which conforms to certain reasonable, well-tried rules and does not seek to break away from accepted practice. In a later chapter something will be said about experimental forms, but it may be worth while saying now that experiment is more likely to lead to successful results if it proceeds from an intimate knowledge of traditional forms than if it is conducted by one who, impatient of the past, plunges headlong into innovations whose only claim to notice is that they are new. Of legitimate innovations I will speak later. For the present we will confine ourselves to a consideration of plays which are regarded, by ordinary standards, as well-made and are, loosely speaking, realistic or naturalistic. The adjective is, of course, inexact, for no play, however photographically it reproduces the material seeming of real life, is even remotely realistic. Selection, dovetailing, and telescoping are not only artistically commendable, but in practice unavoidable. Nevertheless, it is possible so to present plays on the stage that they assume a semblance of real life—plays in which the characters are recognizably human and comport themselves in much the same manner as men and women comport themselves in the world around us, plays in which nothing happens that might not conceivably happen in real life; plays, in brief, which endeavour to depict life faithfully as in a mirror intended faithfully to reflect and not perversely to distort.

A good play is organic, like a human being, not put together, like a machine. A machine is designed to fulfil a specific function—to cut paper, to weave cloth, to haul

cargo, it achieves its aim, if successful, because it is well constructed—but only if the mechanic working it is in possession of the required skill. But a human being is a self-sufficient community—a skeleton, a complex of correlated organs, a nervous system, a muscular system, all working in harmony, plus that unknown quantity called personality which makes one human being essentially different from all other human beings, in a word, a human being is designed to *live*. He does not need a stoker, or a mechanic to turn handles and press buttons, he is a complete autonomous entity. Similarly with a play. A play may be constructed according to all the rules of dramatic technique and yet fail to come to life—it remains a machine without a mechanic to work it. It may break many of the academic rules and yet, because the author has imbued it with vitality, it may transcend rules and become a living work of art in spite of technical flaws.

The first essential of a good play, then, is that it should be alive, bearing within it the principle of natural growth. The playwright conceives an idea, which germinates first of all in his mind, and afterwards, when the embryo is sufficiently advanced, it may be handled and shaped into a play. But before the aspiring author troubles his brain about dramatic construction (the skeleton, shall we say), he must be convinced that he has a play to write and is not merely inspired by the wish to have written a play. A vague impulse towards creation is not enough—that will end only in a sense of frustration. The desire must be definite and dynamic and must be supported by the conviction that one has something acceptable to express and the innate power to express it. The impulse may spring from many legitimate sources, some of which we will now consider.

### **The Situation**

The desire to write a play may arise from some situation which has forced itself upon one's attention. Let our fancy roam over one such situation. John, after having married

Jane, discovers that she had been married before he got to know her and had concealed the knowledge from him, possibly for shameful reasons, possibly out of consideration for his peace of mind, possibly because she was just foolish and did not realize the hypothetical implications of her silence. Situation enough, here, to set a playwright going. We may consider what would happen if the first husband, believed by Jane to be dead and therefore properly dumb, turned up. Or we may take another possible line of development and imagine what the effect would be if a child by the first husband, carefully committed to the keeping of a trusted friend or retainer, should make his or her unexpected appearance, to the astonishment of John (hitherto happy in his ignorance) and the dismay and shame of Jane. We might allow our imagination to take even more daring flights, the banished son of the first husband might chance to meet the daughter of the second—in foreign parts, shall we say—and, all unsuspecting the relationship, fall in love with her. The tragic implications of this encounter will keep our minds busy for a time, and then (if we are among those who believe that tragedy has no right to exist on the modern stage) it will be borne in upon us that there is no escape from this impasse, and our splendid theme has led to a blind alley. We continue our brooding and presently the idea is born that the husband—hitherto to all appearances the innocent victim—might have a guilty past also; he, poor man, had a wife already when he married Jane, but a wife locked up in an asylum for incurables. Happy solution! The marriage between Jane and John is no marriage, therefore there is presumably no legal reason why Jane's unacknowledged son should not marry her fatherless daughter. Here we have a chance for a first-class conflict. Shall Jane tell? Shall John tell? Shall happiness be allowed to depend on ignorance? Shall the happiness of the innocent offspring be built on so precarious a foundation? And so forth. The audience, who alone will be in possession of all the facts, past and present, will have a fine



time The author, if he knows his job, will be able to keep everybody in a state of acute suspense until the very end It will be seen that the possible developments from a very simple relationship are many and various, good and bad, convincing and unconvincing, tragic or comic, and hundreds of plays have been born of a situation no more pregnant

For plays of this kind the French have a special predilection, and the names of Bernstein, Scribe, Sardou, Hervieu, and many others spring to the mind, but they have no monopoly, and Schnitzler, Sudermann, Henry Arthur Jones, Pinero, Oscar Wilde, and many of their contemporaries were similarly stimulated Moreover, as many of the succeeding generation have availed themselves of much the same expedients, it may be assumed that the play of situation still has a good deal of life in it Several of Somerset Maugham's plays are plays of situation, including the admirably constructed comedy *The Circle*, from which I have quoted so liberally, and that the younger generation does not despise this sort of play is clear from Mr Noel Coward's liking for it His *Easy Virtue* is a play of situation, very much in the Jones-Pinero tradition, so is *The Vortex*, so, with a difference, is *Private Lives*, the difference consisting in the deliberate pattern-making of this play which distinguishes it from the more or less natural development of the average good play of situation

An indispensable condition of a dramatic situation is plausibility, this achieved, the complications and permutations may be as many and ingenious as the theme allows, if it be always borne in mind that there is no intrinsic virtue in complexity and a good deal in simplicity Without plausibility, no amount of ingenuity will save a play An author has no right to ask his audience to believe in a situation inherently impossible or absurd as the price of an evening's exhibition of ingeniously resolved complications Even situations which are highly improbable should be resorted to sparingly, and then only if the author is quite sure that he has skill enough to make them convincing.

At one time the wildest absurdities of coincidence and purblindness seem to have been accepted in the theatre, but to-day verisimilitude is demanded of plays which claim to be true to life. Misunderstandings which would be explained away in five minutes of real life are no longer allowed to occupy two and a half hours' traffic of the stage, parents are not permitted to recognize at first sight offspring from whom they have been separated for upwards of twenty years in order to pander to the sentimental notion that because blood is thicker than water it is therefore endowed with abnormal powers of divination, buxom young women are no longer allowed to attire themselves in masculine apparel and pass for men, however deep the timbre of their voices, however manly their gait. There is a type of play in which the author may count on the credulity of the audience, in which a kind of pact is made at the rising of the curtain whereby judgment is suspended for the duration of the performance, but the realistic situation play does not come within that category. The author of a situation play must expect no quarter if his work lacks plausibility.

It is necessary to distinguish between situation and story. Every play is, in a sense, a story, if a story may be defined as a series of connected happenings. Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* has a very easily related story, Galsworthy's tragic demonstration of the impersonality of Justice, in the play bearing that title, has a story, plays as essentially of the theatre as Chekhov's have stories, even a play like Shaw's *Misalliance*, which is superficially nothing but a discussion, has a story; and there is no intrinsic reason why certain well-known plays—Arnold Bennett's and Edward Knoblock's play *Milestones*, Mr J B Priestley's *Eden End*, and Mr John van Druten's *Young Woodley*, for instance—should have been conceived as plays rather than as novels. But of the works mentioned, only one—*The Second Mrs Tanqueray*—could be properly described as a play of situation.

Theatrically speaking, a situation is a number of circumstances which, taken separately, have no special dramatic

significance, but, taken in relation to one another, form a combination which is, in itself, pregnant with dramatic possibilities. The fact that John marries Jane is not dramatic, the fact that Jane has been previously married, and has lost sight of her husband, believing him to be dead, the fact that the son of Jane by her first husband should meet and become enamoured of her daughter by her second husband—none of these facts, taken separately, is dramatic, combined, they make a situation which contains the very essence of drama.

Nor must story be confused with plot. A plot is the interrelated material out of which a play is built. A story narrates how Beta follows Alpha, and Delta follows Gamma, until Omega is reached and the narrative comes to an end. But a plot is primarily concerned not with one thing succeeding another, but with Omega's structural relation to Alpha, and Alpha's to Gamma, and so on through all the units of construction. If the story of *The Circle* had been written as a novel, Mr. Maugham would probably have followed the narrative chronologically. On this assumption we should have heard about Clive Champion-Cheney's meeting with Lady Kitty and their marriage; of the appearance on the scene of Lord Porteous. The story of the marriage would have been unfolded, the seeds of discontent revealed, leading to the elopement of Lady Kitty with Lord Porteous, leaving a desolate husband. The novelist would then have had a choice of following Lady Kitty and her cavalier into their exile and revealing the moral deterioration which ensued, or of following the development of Clive Champion-Cheney in England with his only son Arnold, or of following both sets of characters. Then would come the meeting of Arnold with Elizabeth; their marriage, the boredom, the advent of Teddie Luton, and the development as outlined in the play. We can imagine the masterly fashion in which Mr. Maugham would tell such a story, and how utterly different the technique would be from that employed in constructing *The Circle*.

The essentials of the story are disclosed during a couple of hours' action on the stage, but by methods which are necessarily more economical than those of the narrative form. Inevitably, as one reads a novel, the impression of the earlier pages recedes, it would be a phenomenally retentive memory which kept a clear and detailed picture of a novel from the first page to the last. On the other hand, it would be a phenomenally poor memory which could not retain the greater part of what had been presented to it for the two or three hours' traffic of the stage. The first act of a play ought to be so clearly engraved on the memory that one is conscious of it when seeing the last act, thus the behaviour of characters in Act 4 is explained by something revealed in Act 2, in Act 1 we are given a hint of what to expect in Act 3. Arnold, in Act 1 of *The Circle*, refers to Teddie Luton thus—

I think it was a good thing to have Teddie Luton down  
I don't know that he's very intelligent, but, you know, there  
are occasions when you want a bull in a china shop

The speech had its place in its context, it is "in character"; it carries on the action; and, if it had no further purpose, it would not be out of place. But it is only when later on it is revealed that Teddie is far from unintelligent, that he will be a bull in a china shop, indeed, breaking up the happy home by running off with Arnold's wife, that the peculiarly acid flavour of this speech of Arnold's will be fully appreciated. The serious playwright looks before and after, backwards and forwards and backwards again, counting on the attention of his audience, who will be the losers if they fail to appreciate the pattern of his work.

### The Thriller

Allied to the play of situation is the thriller, with specimens of which I claim no great familiarity. As the chief aim of a thriller is to shock by surprise, some of the usual dramatic practices have to be abandoned. The old dramatic law,

that the audience should never be kept in the dark concerning the playwright's intentions, which never possessed the validity with which it was invested by the theorists, is completely discountenanced by the writer of thrillers. The author of one kind of thriller would, indeed, feel that he had failed in his task if the audience even suspected who the real criminal was before the final curtain was about to descend. The law of plausibility applies with no less force to the thriller than to other kinds of play, but the plausibility does not need to survive beyond the end of the play. Having achieved his thrill, and kept the audience guessing throughout the whole of an evening, the author cannot be expected to submit his play to a post-mortem examination. Mr Emlyn Williams, in *Night Must Fall*, one of the most successful thrillers of recent years, horrified and shocked most members of his audience with a situation which would not bear five minutes' close scrutiny. His skill lay in inducing his public to suspend their judgment while he made their flesh creep, and, as it was to have their flesh made to creep that most of them had come to the theatre, they were quite prepared to join in the conspiracy. A thriller is, after all, a sort of fairy tale in which nobody believes but which nobody disputes.

Most of the usages which apply to the normal play hold good for the thriller, tightened and heightened: suspense is even more breath-bating, tension even more taut, the denouement an even greater relief, elasticity—a virtue in other plays—is a crime in the thriller, character-drawing claims little attention, and true psychology goes a-begging.

### Plays of Character

Another source of dramatic inspiration is character. Sometimes a character, or a group of characters, will assault an author's mind and clamour to be put into a play. The author thus assailed would be well advised to give his assailants an opportunity of disclosing whether they are psychologically interesting and dramatically likely to be

effective Plays born of character are, other things being equal, more likely to have vitality than plays born of a situation

A play devoted to the exploitation of a single character is more difficult to handle than one in which several characters share the burden, but, obviously, if it fulfils the fundamental dramatic requirements, no convincing argument can be urged against it. Moreover, although it would appear that many plays have come into existence on account of the vitality of a single character—Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie*, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, and other plays, H. A. Vachell's *Quinney's*, St. John Ervine's *Jane Clegg*, among others—not to mention *Hamlet*<sup>1</sup>—an examination of these plays would in most cases reveal that the central character demands one character or more of almost equal vitality for its proper expression. One serious objection to the practice of endowing one character with an undue share of a play is that it is comparable to putting all the eggs in one basket, if the chief character fails, either in the dramatist's conception of it or in the actor's interpretation of it, the whole play collapses. On the whole, although there is no theoretical heresy in weaving a play round a single character and giving that character the centre of the stage, it is a technique fraught with many dangers from which only particularly skilled dramatists are likely to be immune.

Some authors have declared that their characters, once conceived, take the law into their own hands and behave independently of their creator. Such a statement need not be taken too literally. It may have been made in an access of parental pride and exaltation, or, more probably, was due to a mis-grasp of what really happened. It is, of course, quite true that the vitality of some characters is so immense that more than common care is needed to keep it within bounds. Falstaff and Hamlet must have been a handful<sup>1</sup>. But when a playwright claims that one of his characters has taken the law into its own hands, probably what has really happened is that the author, following the line of

least resistance, has not been sufficiently detached from his offspring, but has allowed its development to pursue too facile a course. He has found that one thing leads to another, one line of dialogue has suggested another, one action another, and so on. The process of growth has seemed to be working splendidly—the delighted author—flushed with gratitude for this outpouring of the creative spirit—records everything hurriedly lest the flow should cease, and, when exhaustion point comes, he sits back and murmurs in all humility: “Really, the beggars ran away with me! One would think I was not the author of their being . . .” Only later, when calmness has brought wisdom, is he likely to realize that when the beggars ran away with him they took the wrong turning.

It may be laid down as an axiom that, however enamoured a dramatist may be of his characters, a certain critical aloofness is absolutely essential. A character in a novel may perhaps be allowed to run amok for a few pages and be brought back by the scruff of the neck before going too far, in a play such dallying is indefensible. Deviations from the path of dramatic rectitude cannot be corrected. Good intentions and good resolutions avail nothing; damnation is inevitable.

A character which has sufficient vitality to force itself upon an author’s consciousness is likely to need firm handling. It must not be given its head, it must be argued with and not allowed to impose its will upon the author until the author is properly convinced. Bearing in mind that a play is, first of all, action in logical continuity, it becomes clear that every speech which a character wishes to utter, every movement which a character wishes to make, must be minutely scrutinized before it is allowed to pass. Words and movements may be perfectly “in character” and yet serve no dramatic purpose, and, as it is one of the fundamental laws of drama that anything which does not help hinders, it follows that irrelevancies born of character, however delightful in themselves, however witty, must be

pitilessly sacrificed Irrelevant emotions must be heartlessly stifled, irrelevant actions firmly discountenanced, irrelevant epigrams scattered to the winds Not for any phrase, epigram, or elegant posture is it worth sacrificing the effectiveness and convincingness of a character, no character in a well-made play is important enough to be allowed to destroy the balance of the whole dramatic conception Dramatic purpose should always take precedence over character, not because the former is superior to the latter, but because character is able to display itself effectively only if the laws of drama are enforced

Another danger at which I have already hinted, of which the experienced dramatist is only too aware but which the novice may overlook, is that, however minutely and lovingly a character has been conceived and drawn, the actor has not yet been born who can embody it, in all its essentials and all its details, on the stage The essentials may be there and the details lacking, the details may be there and the essentials falsified A compromise of some sort is inevitable, and, if this is borne in mind and the limitations of the medium are accepted, the temptation to sacrifice drama for the sake of character-drawing may be somewhat lessened.

But if subtleties of characterization must be employed sparingly, it is some consolation to know that subtleties of psychology need be limited only by the author's insight into human conduct and by his capacity for embodying it in dramatic form What may be called the psychological make-up of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* might be revealed almost equally well by several different actresses—let us say by such different artists as Mrs Patrick Campbell and Miss Jean Forbes Robertson—and it would be impossible, after seeing both interpretations, to declare with conviction which of the two Heddas was likelier to approximate to Ibsen's own Indeed, it would be much safer to assume—judging by one's own experience of the transformation of character wrought by talented and experienced actors—that neither of them bore the slightest resemblance to Hedda as conceived



by him Nevertheless, so exact is Ibsen's psychological insight, and so sensitively did Mrs Patrick Campbell and Miss Forbes Robertson respond to it, that both of them were able to draw completely satisfying portraits.

Character-drawing and psychological development are not, of course, mutually exclusive They impinge and overlap; but they are not identical with one another, and it is just as well for the dramatist to have a clear conception of their separate functions Character is essentially static; psychological development necessarily dynamic The object of characterization is to reveal people as they are. their physical characteristics, their manners, their idiosyncrasies, the ways in which they differ from other people—these are the means by which character is displayed in action, by the interplay between one personality and others, by the changes wrought by changed circumstances, by emotional and mental action and reaction One of the reasons why a first-class novel rarely makes a first-class play is that the novelist, having a much wider canvas upon which to draw and display his people, is able to describe and expatiate upon a hundred-and-one details of character which the dramatist cannot even touch upon; the dramatist is compelled to leave much of his character-drawing to some hypothetical actor who may misconceive his intentions Famous characters in fiction, whose vitality in the printed page is stupendous—Micawber, Pickwick, Becky Sharp, for example—become puppets with grotesque mannerisms when transferred to the stage The psychological development in cases like these is relatively unimportant it is character which is the author's primary concern He offers his readers an exhibition showing how people behave, not a demonstration of why people behave in a certain way It is significant that, with the appearance of the modern psychological novel, which leaves no cranny of the mind's working uncovered "characters" in the Dickensian sense have almost disappeared from fiction We all know Sarah Gamp, Betsy Tiotwood, Mrs Tulliver—even those of us who have

ceased to read Dickens and George Eliot—but who of us could remember even the names of the people in novels by the most distinguished of our contemporaries, much less their characters in the round?

The dramatist, then, is thrown back on sound psychological development and a blind faith that his interpreters, with the aid of the careful indications which his text provides, will make convincing flesh-and-blood creatures of his puppets

If the play born of a character, or of a group of characters, is surrounded with pitfalls from which the play of situation is free, it is some compensation to know that it dwells on a much higher plane and is, at its best, of supreme interest and significance, for no faculty of the dramatist is more valuable than that which enables him to show mankind the image of itself and to throw light on the mysterious sources of human behaviour. The power to draw and display human character, plus the power to analyse and express psychological reactions in all their strangeness, is the dramatist's rarest and most precious gift, without which his art would be that admirable but lesser thing, craft

### **Reformer's Fervour**

Let us now consider another starting-point. An author may be tormented by some special problem and wish to embody it in dramatic form, perhaps merely to give it an airing and provoke discussion, more probably because he is convinced that he has a solution to the problem and wishes altruistically to bestow it upon a waiting world. Most of the plays of Bernard Shaw avowedly belong to this class. Mr. Shaw has said many times that he turned his attention to the theatre because the theatre offered the most effective platform for the expression of his ideas. And Matthew Arnold's dictum is famous: "The theatre is irresistible—organize the theatre." John Galsworthy, Brieux, Ibsen, Strindberg, Eugene O'Neill, Ernst Toller, Elmer Rice, and

numerous other well-known dramatists have written successful plays that were inspired by a burning desire to reform the world, to express an unconventional point of view, or to call attention to an evil towards which the world appeared to be apathetic, and this impulse to creation is at least as serviceable as any other, and more likely than most to result in a play worth seeing

A great deal of nonsense has been written about propaganda in art, and the drama in particular has suffered from a generalization which would rigidly exclude all didacticism from the realm of the theatre. This attitude of mind reveals a peculiar ignorance of the history of the drama and of the habits of dramatists. The very roots of the theatre are embedded in the passion to instruct. Leaving the great Greeks and Oriental dramatists out of consideration, what about our own theatrical history? As we have already seen, it is quite clear that the theatre in Europe would not have come into existence at all if it had not been for an urgent desire to display the history and teachings of the Christian religion in dramatic form. The early Mysteries and Morality Plays have no other origin.

Because the chief function of the theatre in these days is to entertain—using the word in a liberal sense—we are losing sight of the fact that by thus confining it we are attempting to warp its natural growth and to limit its appeal. It may be relatively true to say that within the charmed circle of the London West-End theatres—and the statement no doubt applies equally to several other capitals—propaganda is taboo. Luckily, however, the theatre is not circumscribed by the dictates of commercialism, but is subject to laws of its own, and, although its growth may be for a time artificially stimulated in one direction and dwarfed in another, sooner or later it will readjust itself, break down barriers, and follow the lines of development inherent in its own nature.

The desire to plead a particular cause or to advocate certain reforms, in a word, propaganda, is a legitimate

source of inspiration, as well as a fruitful and admirable one, but obviously the propagandist must be the servant of the dramatist and not his master. Indeed, where propaganda plays are concerned, it might almost be said that the source of inspiration must be forgotten as soon as the play is properly under way. I believe it was Mr Granville-Barker—if it was not he it was some other prominent Fabian dramatist—who said that it ought to be possible to make a play out of the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission. If he meant that there was enough material in the Report to arouse the passionate indignation of the dramatist and set in motion the machinery of creation, his statement was literally true. A Blue book which had nothing to do with life as lived by the average man and woman would be an unfruitful source of inspiration to the dramatist, but one dealing with agriculture, with armaments, with industries, with national fitness, or with the preservation of ancient monuments might well fertilize the playwright's mind with material which would germinate and become a first-class play. Zeal, backed by knowledge, is a necessary ingredient in any successful enterprise, and if the incipient dramatist—scared by the thought that his play will be branded “propagandist”—avoids treating of subjects which stimulate his social conscience, he will stultify his own inspiration and render a disservice to the community. If, on the other hand, he is scornful of labels and lets his zest find its appropriate outlet, he must keep a careful watch on his enthusiasm, and realize that a play is a work of art first of all, and only secondly an instrument of propaganda. The realization that the law, however theoretically just, bears more heavily upon the poor than upon the rich, probably inspired Galsworthy to write *The Silver Box*, but, once having set out to write the play, it is clear that he concentrated his attention on the development of plot and character in such a manner as to secure the greatest possible dramatic effect; the moral he wished to draw was no doubt at the back of his mind during the whole process of creation, but he must

have known that the force of his advocacy would be great or small in proportion to the degree of conviction created in the mind of the audience by his characters and their development

*Ghosts* would never have been written if Ibsen had not wished to demonstrate what he deemed (wrongly, it appears) to be a biological law of heredity—that the effects of the excesses of the father are visited on the son. But the play is innocent of any directly propagandist statements. The story unfolds itself, inevitably, to its tragic ending, and points its own moral. If the biology implicit in *Ghosts* is unscientific, the play is the more apt an example of rightly-planned propagandist drama, because its power and truth as a play are in no way invalidated by the falseness of its biological premisses. For the duration of the play we are willing to accept them: our emotions are stirred and our moral senses aroused in precisely the same degree as if the incidents placed before us and their implications were indisputable, and that is all that can be asked of any play. *Ghosts* is unlikely ever to fail to make its appeal, because it is so deftly constructed, so certain of its dramatic effect, that the onlooker is willing to suspend judgment on all matters which do not arise directly out of the action and characterization. Ibsen in this and other plays proves himself to have mastered propaganda as a source of dramatic inspiration.

Propaganda is implicit in many modern plays which superficially have no connexion with anything so tainted by "uplift." The castigation of society by ridicule and by an honest picture of its own countenance is a form of propaganda beloved by many writers of comedies, and there are not many plays from which even overt propaganda of a kind is altogether excluded. The following two passages (to make a last quotation from *The Circle*), although strictly germane to the play and its theme, obviously express a conviction which the author himself would not disown—

ELIZABETH I'm a human being. I can stand on my own feet.

LADY KITTY Have you any money of your own?

ELIZABETH None

LADY KITTY Then how can you stand on your own feet? You think I'm a silly, frivolous woman, but I've learnt something in a bitter school. They can make what laws they like, they can give us the suffrage, but when you come down to bed o'ck it's the man who pays the piper who calls the tune. Woman will only be the equal of man when she earns her living in the same way that he does.

Again, when Elizabeth and Teddie go off with each other, in spite of all warnings—

LADY KITTY Oh, Hughie, how it all comes back to me! Will they suffer all we suffered? And have we suffered all in vain?

PORTEOUS My dear, I don't know that in life it matters so much what you do as what you are. No one can learn by the experience of another because no circumstances are quite the same. If we made rather a hash of things perhaps it was because we were rather trivial people. You can do anything in the world if you're prepared to take the consequences, and consequences depend on character.

Bernard Shaw, the perfect Ibsenite when it is a matter of ideas, but a poor disciple when it comes to dramatic technique, is the propaganda dramatist *par excellence*. Lacking Ibsen's architectural sense and his superb economy, and having less concern with posterity than with his own castigable generation, Shaw has nearly always put propaganda first and art second. He has thereby run the risk of indehibly labelling his plays with the date of their production. The flogging of dead horses is neither a dramatic nor an edifying spectacle, and plays which explicitly attack abuses that have ceased to afflict us are bound eventually to sink into oblivion. Some of Shaw's early plays have already met their doom, and he would probably be the first to admit, indeed to claim, that having served their purpose the proper place for them is the museum library. His irrepressible vitality, his superabundant wit, his impish audacity, and his fertility in invention have blinded some of us to his comparatively poor technique and faulty sense of form. The

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dramatist imbued with propagandist fervour as ardent as Shaw's, but without Shaw's incomparable gifts, would be well advised not to study his methods. The unusual and difficult technique of Shaw's masterpiece, *Heartbreak House*, might, if emulated, yield desirable results. The rest of his propagandist plays—and that is all of them—would repay study for their ideas, but rarely for their method. A safer master to follow, who seldom falsified a character even momentarily in order to press home a point, is Galsworthy.

What it all boils down to is this: the playwright who is moved by righteous indignation to attack, or by unbounded enthusiasm to glorify, should make sure that these admirable emotions have not taken possession of him, but are completely under his control, ready to inspire but not to dictate to him, the horse, not the rider.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE WELL-MADE PLAY (II)

#### Structure

THE structure of the well-made play has a certain skeleton-like rigidity, but is capable, like a skeleton, of different forms. A play may be in is and be subdivided into as many scenes, so long as the emphases are right. It is all a question of proportion and rhythm. There is perhaps a certain geometrical balance about the three-act form which gives it an initial advantage over more complicated mediums. It is, as it were, a triptych with a central act of great weight and significance, balanced on the one hand by a first act of exposition and awakening interest, and on the other by a third act devoted to the resolving of complexes, the unravelling of tangled skeins, the tying of loose ends.

Perhaps it is this obvious symmetry which makes the three-act form appear to be the most suitable for artificial comedy, especially in these days when intricacies of plot—which a generation ago might properly have claimed four or five acts—are discountenanced. The triple form lends itself to the weaving of a play of light texture and readily assimilable content more readily than the more solid four-act structure, as for the five-act play, it seems to have gone out of fashion since two hours, or at the most two and a half hours, came to be regarded as the maximum duration of an evening's theatrical entertainment. But there is no inherent reason why an artificial comedy should not be in four acts or in as many acts as the author can handle with dexterity while keeping the bubble intact and iridescent.

Whether the playwright should start out with a definite scheme in his mind or shape his material as he goes is a question which is frequently debated—but rarely by the



practising playwright The playwright knows that there is no golden rule The temperament of one author favours one method, the temperament of another, another What is essential, as I have said before, is that the urge to write a play should not be confused with a desire to have written a play If a would-be playwright has any doubts on this point, it will be salutary if, before putting pen to paper, he endeavours to visualize, in some detail, the play he thinks he wants to write If he is able to see his characters assemble themselves before his inward eye, display themselves in apparently logical relationships, and follow a developing course of action to a possible climax, then he may take on the burden of authorship with a relatively light heart To embark on a play because a hazy theme has presented itself, in the hope that "it will all come right in the end"—a hope born solely of a desire to see one's name on a playbill and oneself shyly making a speech across the footlights on some hypothetical first night—is to make a perilous voyage leading almost inevitably to disillusionment

Whether it is desirable to work to a scenario is again an open question which can only be answered according to the idiosyncrasies of the author So long as the result is a structure whose parts relate logically to the whole, it is of little consequence whether a scenario is employed or not Mr Edward Knoblock, well known for his technical efficiency—a play-doctor and play-adaptor *par excellence*—has placed it on record that he works to a scenario of the most elaborate kind, with all the entrances and exits scrupulously planned, the substance of each scene not merely indicated vaguely, but described in detail, with the drift of the dialogue outlined, and the division into scenes and acts carefully schemed Some authors would find this concentration on the framework inhibitive, their creative flow would dry up under the compulsion to direct their attention to the skeleton rather than to the vital spark which animates it. Others, like Mr Knoblock, would no more think of writing a play without constructing a scenario beforehand

than a mason would set about building a house without having the scheme of construction well laid down in blue and white. There is the example of *Kismet*. The scenario of *Kismet* occupies some thirty pages of print, about a third of the space occupied by many a complete play. The following brief extract gives an idea of the method—

*Hajji is brought by the Guard, followed by Shopkeepers and a Crowd,  
in which is the Guide of Scene I  
Hajji accused by Shopkeeper I  
Shopkeeper II bearing No I witness  
Hajji protests  
Meant to pay    Excitement of new clothes made him forget  
Produces money  
Where did he get his money?  
Sheikh of desert  
They all laugh  
Sheikh of desert does not give money  
Sheikhs are outlaws, robbers  
Not allowed in town  
Hajji says he is in town  
Notices Guide (Nasir) in crowd  
Appeals to Guide  
Guide says it is true that Sheikh is in town  
Then, says Executioner, Sheikh must be taken before Sultan  
Sultan has an audience this afternoon  
Sheikh an exile (by old Sultan)  
Executioner cannot allow the word of the deceased monarch to be  
disregarded  
Sends Guide off to show the Guard the caravansary at which Sheikh  
is stopping  
Hajji interrupts  
One word  
He asks guide did he, the Sheikh, not throw Hajji a purse  
Guide repeating Hajji's words (Scene I) "I saw no purse"  
All laugh  
Guide off with the Guard*

There can be no doubt that with a scenario as completely schemed as this many snares are avoided. False trails are

not likely to be followed, to the prejudice of the principal theme, the author will not discover half-way through his play that his theme ends in a cul-de-sac, assuming that the scenario is a good one the shape of the play, being seen thus in skeleton-form, is likely to retain a certain comeliness of design, redundant characters can be eliminated in the early stages, in fact as soon as the author knows the way he is going. Many of the most eminent exponents of the well-made play have invariably worked to a scenario, many just as prominent, whose plays are certainly no less taut in their construction, did not. Those who use a scenario are inclined to think that it is a sign of slovenly workmanship not to do so. Those who scorn to use a scenario protest that, their minds being unshackled, they are likelier to produce a living, organic work of art than those whose course is confined within a preconceived design. Between these two opinions there is no need to choose. Sardou, whose chief claim is the tight construction and theatrical effectiveness of his plays, held firmly to his scenario, Galsworthy, whose plays are equally tight in construction and are certainly no more wasteful in method than Sardou's, and who achieved precisely the effect at which he aimed, disliked the idea of employing a scenario.

When the practices of successful dramatists are so divergent, it would obviously be absurd to lay down laws. But this much may be said: that no competent play was ever written by an author who did not start out with some definite situation, character, plot, or "message" to exploit. A nebulous impulse, born, as so many such impulses are, of sincere admiration for Mr. X's work, will lead nowhere, or at best to the composition of a play in unconscious imitation of the work of Mr. X. An elaborate scheme is manifestly not essential, but the beginner would be well advised to have a possible climax and winding-up in his mind before he has been long at work on a play. First acts and second acts which pursue an easy and exuberant course to triumphant curtains, *and no further*, must be the

experience of many beginners who have not had the wisdom to cast a glance at the possibilities which reside beyond the fall of the first and second curtains, while tame or supererogatory last acts have wrought the downfall of many plays which would otherwise have stood a reasonable chance of success

### The First Act

The business of a first act is to awaken interest and to maintain a feeling of expectancy until the fall of the curtain. The chief characters must be introduced as early as possible. They need not be present in person—interest may be aroused in them by allusions which bring them into the consciousness of the audience; but this is a tricky device which needs skilful manipulation. An audience must not be allowed to visualize a character too clearly before his entry, lest on his appearance the reality should conflict with the character as he exists in the imagination of the audience. This, if not the effect aimed at, might be inconvenient or even disastrous. But whether in the flesh or in the mind of the audience, important characters should not long delay their first entrance. As a corollary of this, it should be remembered that characters who play an unimportant part in the main theme of the play should not be allowed to attain too great a prominence. The balance of many otherwise competent plays has been spoiled because small parts have attracted more attention than principal parts. This defect is due sometimes to the author, who has become so enamoured of one of his minor creations that he could not refrain from developing it in excess of its immediate purpose, and sometimes to the actor, whose fertility of invention has not been kept in check by the producer.

As it cannot be assumed that the audience will be perfectly receptive at the rise of the curtain, the earliest moments of a play should not contain matter of vital importance. It would be unwise to allow essential facts or relationships to

be divulged as soon as the curtain goes up and then left to be assumed without further elucidation. Late-comers, like other sinners, should be abandoned to their well-deserved retribution; but even those who are present at the opening of a play are apt to have their minds so full of irrelevant matters that the effort of concentration required for taking in a new set of relationships inevitably absorbs some moments. The wise playwright, if the theme of his play justifies it, will allow a few minutes of quiet relevant action to occupy the mind of the audience while the process of focusing the attention is taking place. Even the most attentive member of an audience will spend some time in endeavouring to take in the physical details of the scene as soon as the drawing of the curtains discloses it, and while his eyes are thus kept busy, his ears are only partly alert. Mr St John Ervine's play, *Jane Clegg*—an altogether admirable example of the well-made play—is eminently quotable in this connexion. When the curtain rises, Jane Clegg, the principal character, is silently sewing. Her mother, Mrs Clegg, is watching her two grandchildren at play with “bricks” in front of the fire, the girl—

*sometimes knocks over the structures which her brother laboriously builds*

The audience thus has plenty of time to take in the scene and its possible significance. The social class of the characters—an important point in a play of this kind—may be deduced from the setting, and, during the first few moments before anything is said, the characters on the stage may be given “the once-over.” The first three speeches disclose essential relationships—

MRS CLEGG I can't think wot's keepin' 'Enry

JANE CLEGG (*without looking up from her sewing*) Busy, I suppose

MRS CLEGG 'E's always busy I don't believe men are 'alf so busy as they make out they are! Besides I know 'Enry! I 'aven't 'ad the motherin' of 'im for nothink 'E don't kill 'imself with work, 'Enry don't

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JANE CLEGG (*in an undertone*) Oh, hush, Mother, before the children

From this scrap of dialogue it is fairly safe to deduce that Mrs Clegg is the mother of Henry, that Jane Clegg is her daughter-in-law and the mother of the two children. Moreover, it discloses the fact (which subsequent happenings will make significant) that Mrs Clegg is not in any doubt concerning her son's failings.

Mr Noel Coward's two-scene play, *Fumed Oak*, the theme of which is somewhat similar to that of *Jane Clegg*, opens in a similarly quiet fashion, and, although this is not a "well-made" play within our present meaning, it is a naturalistic play, and the same principle applies. Mother-in-law (Mrs. Rockett), Wife (Doris), and Child (Elsie) are shown in similar juxtaposition, and in a setting which reveals a similar suburban respectability. When the curtain rises Mrs Rockett is seated in an armchair by the fire, with her cup of tea on a small table by her side, Doris is at the breakfast-table, reading a newspaper propped up against the cruet, Elsie, the child, is cutting toast into strips and dipping them into her boiled egg—

*There is complete silence broken only by the occasional rattle of a spoon in a cup or a snuffle from Elsie, who has a slight head cold*

The audience has had time to absorb the essential features of the scene before Henry, the husband, enters—

*He sits down at the table without a word. Doris automatically rises and goes out, returning in a moment with a plate of haddock which she places in front of him and resumes her place. Henry pours himself out some tea. Doris, without looking at him, being immersed in the paper, passes him the milk and sugar*

All this dumb show is strictly "in character"; it conveys its own information without redundancy, and it makes no great demands on the attention of an audience newly seated. When the dialogue begins, the mind is prepared to accept it, not only on its face value, but in relation to the

setting and the situation revealed by the paper-reading, silent wife and the taciturn husband

Quiet openings like this do not, of course, cover the whole range of possibilities. Dramatic intention must obviously be the first consideration. But it will be found that the practice of writers of "well-made" plays conforms in most cases to the course which I have outlined. An exception may be made of startling openings such as a pistol-shot, a sudden scream, or some similarly catastrophic happening designed to arrest attention at once, but it is only a certain kind of play—broadly classifiable as the thriller—that is likely to employ a device of this kind, which would be very dangerous in a play dealing seriously with life and character. Although there is no fundamental reason why a play should not open with a moment of extreme tenseness or excitement which is gradually resolved to tranquillity during the length of its three or four acts, it will be discovered in practice that a play produces a more satisfying effect upon an audience if it starts comparatively quietly and rises by a series of small crises until it reaches a fitting climax. The drama is not a contemplative, static art; it is dynamic, and, generally speaking, demands that a play shall gather in psychic momentum as it proceeds.

Having satisfactorily opened his play and revealed as briefly and as naturally as possible the relationship of one character to another, the playwright's task is to awaken interest in them and their doings and curiosity concerning their future behaviour, and so keep the attention occupied until the end of the act.

Mr. Ervine, in *Jane Clegg*, follows these rules deftly and economically. His first act is compact of the necessary ingredients. The situation is clearly posited. We know that Henry, the husband, has been unfaithful to his wife some time previously and that Jane, although disillusioned about him, is aware that lack of economic independence makes it impossible for her to leave him and take the children with her, we know that since then she has inherited a certain

sum of money which she intends to devote to the education of the children, in spite of her husband's importunities. By the time Henry enters we have a clear notion of his character and of his relationship with Jane. We suspect that he is still playing a furtive game, underlined by the cock-and-bull story which he tells Jane in order to induce her to part with some of her money, and when, later, Jane having gone to bed, we learn from the seedy bookie, Munce, that he is groaning under racing debts and that he is still carrying on with some other woman, our interest is fully awakened, we know that some shady business is in store, but we do not know what form it will take, or how the dramatist will cope with it. We do know, however, that a client of Henry's employers has erroneously sent him a cheque which ought to have been sent to the firm, and we suspect that this is a signpost erected by the playwright to indicate which way the situation is likely to develop. If we take stock when the curtain comes down, we shall find that we know a great deal about the Clegg *ménage*, but that there are certain unknown factors which make it difficult for us to estimate the likely development of the plot. We are, in a word, left in interested suspense.

### Intermediate Acts

✓ The intermediate acts of the well-made play are concerned with the development of the theme and the increasing of tension. New characters must be introduced only if they bring new light to bear on the situation, or are a necessary part of the environment, and, although new aspects of the main problem or theme may be given, and are indeed expected, it would be fatal to introduce a new one, however unimportant. It would inevitably distract attention from the true focal point and thus diminish the effect produced.

Plays which dodge about in space and time will be mentioned in a later chapter, the "well-made" play does not, strictly speaking, tolerate such hanky-panky. But that



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is not to say that the plot of such a play must not be retrospective, there are few plays, indeed, which do not include a certain amount of necessary retrospective drama. Some—and Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* is the classic example—are almost entirely retrospective. The play in such cases consists in the unfolding of a story which has taken place before the rise of the curtain on the first scene. Veil after veil is stripped from the past, which stands completely revealed only as the final curtain falls. In the hands of a great craftsman like Ibsen such a method as this is capable of producing superb results, but pitfalls are more plentiful than in the forward-moving play, and, unless the technique has been completely mastered, disaster is not easily averted. A good example of the kind of play, roughly chronological, in which event follows event before one's eyes, with scarcely a glance at events which happened before the curtain rose for the first time, is John Galsworthy's *The Silver Box*. It is not the revelation of things past which is dramatic in this play, but the events as they happen on the stage before us. But, whether the play is retrospective or chronological, the same rule applies: the intermediate acts must increase the tension, and only strictly relevant new material must be introduced. What happened before the opening of *Jane Clegg* is sufficiently shown during the unfolding of Act 1; the author reveals enough to throw a light on the subsequent action. The development of the plot in Act 2 increases the tension; Henry's rottenness is uncovered, we see the depths of Jane's bitterness in her cold unsympathetic determination to show Henry that he can no longer take her in. Towards the end of the act, Jane having saved the situation so far as Henry's immediate destiny is concerned, there is some sign of reconciliation. Henry makes advances—presumably insincere—which Jane does not altogether repulse, and we get a hint of the affection which she must have borne him in the old days. But it is all uncertain. Henry is such a liar; Jane is so disillusioned. The author leaves the audience (as indeed he leaves his characters) suspended—

HENRY CLEGG What are you thinking about, Jane?

JANE CLEGG Oh, I wish I could be sure of you, Henry

HENRY CLEGG Well, you are, aren't you?

JANE CLEGG I don't know Oh, yes, I suppose so Come on, let's go to bed Turn out the lamp, will you?

HENRY CLEGG Yes, dear (*He turns out the light Jane stands in the doorway*) Don't be hard on me, Jane I'm not really a bad chap I'm only weak That's all

JANE CLEGG I can't help thinking of that woman, Henry

HENRY CLEGG (*putting his arm about her*) You needn't, dear I swear to God I've not done anything against you I promised you!

JANE CLEGG Yes, you promised

### The Last Act

✓The last act of the well-made play is perhaps the most difficult of all The first act allows the author's fancy to roam more or less at will, because he has the sure and certain knowledge that he has two or three acts to follow in which he may tie up loose ends, correlate his material, and justify the ways of the playwright to the audience The intermediate acts screw down his mind more exactly to the task, the last act condemns or acquits him In the last act a clean sweep must be made of all apparent irrelevancies, light must be shed on all obscurities, and, when the curtain descends inexorably for the last time, the audience must be satisfied that poetic justice has been done All doubts and misgivings which have been generated with so much ingenuity during the earlier part of the play must be dissipated, ambiguous actions which may have been necessary for the effective unfolding of the plot must now be properly and convincingly explained, and, however unexpected the upshot of the play may be, it must be acceptable to a normally intelligent audience To do all this, and yet never to let the purely dramatic content flag, is the difficult task of the last act Explanations, if required, must be skilfully insinuated between lines, thrown off incidentally in the flow of natural dialogue, and, although the end, when

it comes, must seem inevitable, it must not be foreshadowed so clearly that tension is released and the audience receives the impression that it is being told something that it already knew. The greatest danger confronting the dramatist is that he will have unwound so much of his story in the preceding acts that his last act will be given over exclusively to rounding it off, and a dull act will be the result.

Generalizing, it may be said that the penultimate act should contain the biggest scene of a well-made play, but if something of essential interest is not held over for the last act, something which perhaps gives a new twist to the material or throws yet further light on it, or in some other way intensifies the drama, the danger of anticlimax can hardly be avoided. It is permissible, and even desirable, to allow a quiet ending to follow an intense situation—climax does not necessarily imply cataclysm; but the quiet is the quiet which is intended to allow an audience breathing space after unaccustomed tension, and not the dullness born of exhausted interest. Examining *Jane Clegg* for justification of our theorizing, we find that Mr. Ervine has skilfully held over sufficient material to pack his last act. We, the audience, know that Henry has no intention of keeping faith with his wife, we knew even so far back as the first act that, having compromised the "other woman," whom he loved, he would sooner or later leave Jane in the lurch, but we do not know how he will be able to evade the consequences of his lying and shuffling. We know that the story he tells Jane—that he has been forced by his niggardly and hard-hearted employers to pay the bad debts incurred on his commercial round—is a cock-and-bull story, and that if it is exploded his house of cards will fall to the ground, we feel that sooner or later it is bound to be exploded, and every innocent allusion to the subject made by his mother adds to our excitement, because we feel sure that the time will come when she will allude to it in the presence of Henry's colleague, and thus, at a blow, destroy Henry's hope of escape. These things keep us alert and

expectant As one lie after another slips from Henry's lips, possibly deceiving Jane but leaving *us* sceptical, the drama is tightened At the point when Henry, in terror lest his appropriation of his firm's money should land him in gaol, becomes hysterically repentant, we are almost willing to believe that he has suffered a change of heart and really means what he says—

HENRY CLEGG Morrison, you won't tell old Harper to-night, will you? Good God, man, I might be arrested this evening Jane, you'll get me out of it, won't you? I couldn't stand it Look here, I swear I'll be a good husband to you, I will I'll swear it on the Bible, if you like I didn't mean what I said just now It was all talk

JANE CLEGG I wonder if you're worth saving, Henry!

(*Mrs Clegg bursts into tears*)

HENRY CLEGG I'll make myself worth saving, Jane I will, I swear I will (*He tries to kiss her, but she turns away from him*) Morrison, you say something Mother

JANE CLEGG. It isn't necessary, Henry I'll pay the money

Tension is no sooner released by this solution of Henry's immediate problem than it is tightened again by a loud and persistent knocking on the door From *Macbeth* onwards the use of knocking to increase dramatic intensity has been one of the common and legitimate devices of drama Used rightly, not dragged in for its own sake but arising naturally in its context, it can be peculiarly effective. In *Jane Clegg* it is plausibly used; there is no logical reason, perhaps, why the fateful Munce should arrive precisely at the moment when Henry is in a state of collapse, but his arrival then is remarkably dramatic, and it would be hard if the dramatist were denied the right of being dramatic! From that moment on the game is up, and the play winds its way to an inevitable end—the moral disintegration of Henry and the moral triumph of Jane. This is not the place to comment on the theme of *Jane Clegg*; my present purpose is to refer readers to it as a model of dramatic construction

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### Atmosphere

The atmosphere of a play, what one may call its nervous system, is very largely a matter of right preparation, and, like almost every other department of dramatic technique, is intimately concerned with the exclusion of irrelevancies. Everybody knows that, however consummately well the atmosphere of a scene has been built up, it will be destroyed in the twinkling of an eye if a cat unexpectedly crosses the stage. The most perfectly prepared climax, the most scrupulously timed love scene, the most delicately contrived fantasy will be dissipated by an irrelevant sneeze, whether on or off the stage. Such calamities as these are beyond the control of the dramatist and of the actors, but the author is not infrequently guilty of irrelevancies scarcely less disastrous which some blind spot in his mentality has prevented him from seeing. Most common of all is the irresistible joke "A laugh is never wasted," a well-known dramatist once said—a generalization which should be disregarded by all but the most immovably established of authors. An ill-timed laugh is not only wasted—it is an inexcusable irrelevance which may destroy a play, dissipating atmosphere which has taken many minutes to generate and cannot be recaptured.

An obvious way of creating atmosphere is by placing the action in the right setting. Warmth of feeling, passion, or hot-house emotion would have a hard fight against a setting—shall we say, the office of a mining engineer—which gave no suggestion of emotion. The domestic interior—drawing-room, kitchen, dining-room, library—is capable of infinite variety, and any adequate producer, prompted by the author, can contrive an atmosphere suited to the scenes which are to be enacted between the three walls and the imaginary fourth. Open-air settings—particularly for plays dealing with the life of our own times—are much less easy to manage. Intimacy is achieved with difficulty and greater skill is required in manipulating the *dramatis personae*. Scenes in a park almost invariably involve a great wastage

of characters or a great lack of verisimilitude. It is to prey unduly on the credulity of an audience to ask it to believe that all the people who chanced to be in a certain public place at a certain time were essential to the development of the dramatist's plot. The well-made play, which demands plausibility, should walk carefully when it steps out of doors.

The elements—another physical means of creating atmosphere—should be used sparingly. Thunder-storms, howling winds, and noisy rain, legitimate adjuncts of the drama though they be, are apt to prove less impressive on the stage than in the mind of the dramatist. It is so easy to miscalculate mechanical effects that the playwright should be chary of counting on their aid. Even in these days of mechanical efficiency it would be unwise to assume that lightning will always flash at precisely the right moment and that thunder will crash both promptly and realistically when required. Even when—as is usual nowadays—mechanical effects are perfectly produced, the psychological reaction of the audience is an unknown quantity. The rain which fell incessantly during the greater part of the play-version of Somerset Maugham's *Rain* as produced in London, the drums which beat an endless tattoo in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, were doubtless designed to exercise a hypnotic influence upon the minds of the audience, and no doubt partially succeeded in achieving this result, but on many minds the effect was one of irritation, amounting in some cases to exasperation. The attention was fastened on something relatively inessential and diverted from the play itself. The effect of the rain created by Mr. Maugham in the story upon which the play was based was infinitely more powerful than that produced by the ingenious machinery used so self-consciously in the theatre.

The soundest method of evoking atmosphere is through the medium of the dialogue, by the careful selection of the right words, the right sentiments, the right moments for silence, and, above all, by ruthlessly excluding any words, sentiments, or movements which detract from the desired

atmosphere Remembering that the drama is ultimately enacted in the mind of the beholder, the playwright will try to suggest to the beholder's mind only those ideas and emotions which build up the atmosphere which he wishes to create

### Characterization and Dialogue

Dialogue being by far the most important factor in the expression of character, it would be absurd to treat one independently of the other The physical actions which reveal character are crude in comparison with the subtleties which can be revealed by the spoken word and by the silences which reside between one speech and another

As we are at present discussing the well-made play, we may dismiss any consideration of plays which do not aim at presenting characters more or less recognizable as living human beings The "humours" of eighteenth-century comedy do not here concern us, nor are we for the moment dealing with modernist drama which, in some of its developments, has abandoned character-drawing altogether In the well-made play, characters are expected to behave like human beings

It may be said at once that the capacity to create character is either innate or non-existent, it cannot be acquired But even the capacity to create character is useless without the skill to present it convincingly on the stage, and it is there that craft, which *can* be acquired, comes in

A character may seem to spring whole from the mind, ready for action, or it may appear as a somewhat faint, distant figure, elusive but vital, waiting for the dramatist to approach it, seize it, and imprint it on the page Whatever may be the process of conception and birth, once the character is alive in the author's mind, he must brood upon it ceaselessly until he knows all about it and its potentialities He must know it not merely in its present but in its past and possible future He must know just how far it can extend in all directions, how it is likely to express itself as

well as what it is likely to do, in fact he must know exactly what its powers are. Unless the author is on terms of complete intimacy with his characters, he will not be able to make them known to others. It is not necessary that a character should be slavishly consistent so long as its inconsistency is made convincing to an audience—explained, and not left to be taken for granted. Complete consistency is, after all, an attribute of types, and, although it is often sound economy to introduce a readily recognizable type into a play, “type” and “character” are not interchangeable terms.

The first words uttered by a character must be true to the whole conception, and the more they can reveal of the character without sacrificing credibility the better. Let us imagine that a play opens with Mary, Jack, and Jill discovered. The setting is sufficiently individual in style to give some indication of the social class to which these three persons are likely to belong, but nothing else bearing on their characters is visible beyond the manner in which they are dressed—

MARY Did you hear a knock?

JACK Yes, it was the postman.

JILL I wonder who the letter is for.

What characteristics are revealed by this perfectly natural conversation? None at all. The speeches might be interchanged without loss of verisimilitude, Jack's being given to Jill, Jill's to Mary, and so on. There is nothing specially masculine or feminine about them. If Jill had said “whom” instead of “who,” she would have at least revealed a certain punctiliousness, by choosing the ungrammatical but common form of speech she gave nothing away.

Now suppose the speeches had been as follows—

MARY Jill, dear, that was a knock; surely you heard it?

JACK Post. Late as usual.

JILL There's not likely to be a letter for me.

Not very much, but something of the peculiarities of the



three personages is here revealed. We suspect that Mary is possibly mildly affectionate, but petulant or impatient. We deduce that Jack is not of an entirely equable temper, and that optimism is not likely to be Jill's strong point. Other, stronger, indications of character could easily be fitted into three short opening speeches announcing the coming of the postman, some hint might be given of what one of the characters feared the postman might bring, one of them might have expressed fury or joy. There is no need to labour the point. Obviously the opening speeches of a play are important, and, the more quickly an author is able to get his character "over," the more time he has to develop his plot. Gradually, as the play proceeds, it is less necessary to be so exacting, once the character is firmly established, any speech that is "in character" is permissible; a competent actor can be counted on to supply the necessary emphasis and inflexion. But the more explicitly the dialogue reveals the unique qualities of each character, the less easy is it for an actor to go astray and the more likely is the performance to be what the author intended. In the best plays every sentence adds to our knowledge of character, intensifies our interest, and enhances our awareness of personality. Dramatic character-drawing is the gradual revelation of the peculiarities which, combined, make a convincing human being.

Dialogue in the well-made play is not realistic. Scraps of it may be realistic; sentences may be extracted from it which are exactly copied from everyday speech; but, taken as a whole, the dialogue of a good so-called realistic play is no more a reproduction of a natural speech than Frith's picture *Derby Day* is an exact replica of a scene on the Epsom Downs race-course. In art, selection is everything. Phonographically recorded speech is not dialogue. Nobody desires to hear on the stage the loose, meandering, disjointed, inconsequent, *unco-ordinated* speech of daily life. It is the dramatist's task to invent a form of speech which, while consciously significant, gives the semblance of reality.

In doing so, if he is writing a play expressing the life of our times, he will inevitably use forms of speech which are current, transmuting them by some alchemy known only to himself, so that literature, and not reporting, results. The modern masters of dialogue—Shaw, Galsworthy, Somerset Maugham, for example—employ an idiom which in no sense reflects the conversation we hear about us. Open any play of Shaw's at any page and you will find that, however easily it runs, the dialogue is in the best sense literary and not colloquial—

HOTCHKISS I find you merely ridiculous as a preacher, because you keep referring me to places and documents and alleged occurrences in which, as a matter of fact, I don't believe. I don't believe in anything but my own will and pride and honour —(*Getting Married*)

LARRY I tell you, an Irish peasant's industry is not human—it's worse than the industry of a coral insect. An Englishman has some sense about working—he never does more than he can help—and hard enough to get him to do that without scamping it, but an Irishman will work as if he'd die the moment he stopped. That man Matthew Haffigan and his brother Andy made a farm out of a patch of stones on the hill-side—cleared it and dug it with their own naked hands and bought their first spade out of their first crop of potatoes. Talk of making two blades of wheat grow where one grew before! Those two men made a whole field of wheat grow where not even a furze bush had ever got its head up between the stones —(*John Bull's Other Island*)

I should like to hear sinewy prose like this, pointed, eloquent, and rhythmic, in tube trains and buses. If that is not possible, at least let our stage be spared a reproduction of the clipped and rhythmless speech which is current to-day.

Somerset Maugham, less given to long speeches than Shaw, is not less selective, and, when he does permit his characters to be expansive, their prose style is unimpeachable—

MRS DOT I never noticed that you were particularly brilliant.  
 BLENKINSOP I never played for brilliancy. I played for safety.  
 I flatter myself that when prattle was needed I have never

been found wanting I have met the ingenuity of sweet seventeen with a few observations on Free Trade, while the haggard efforts of thirty have struggled in vain against a brief exposition of the higher philosophy The skittish widow of uncertain age has retired in disorder before a complete acquaintance with the restoration dramatists, and I have routed the serious spinster with religious leanings by my remarkable knowledge of the results of missionary endeavour in Central Africa Once a dowager sought to ask me my intentions, but I flung at her astonished head an entire article from the *Encyclopædia Britannica* These are only my serious efforts I need not tell you how often I have evaded a flash of the eyes by an epigram or ignored a sigh by an apt quotation from the poets —(Mrs Dot)

Galsworthy, more restrained than Shaw, less slick than Maugham, is no less literary in the sense in which I am using the word here A famous passage, famous as much for its dramatic effectiveness as for its bitter content, is Stephen More's extempore attack on the mob—

MORE You are here by the law that governs the action of all mobs—the law of Force By that law, you can do what you like to this body of mine You—Mob—are the most contemptible thing under the sun When you walk the street—God goes in

CHIEF STUDENT Be careful, you—sir

VOICES Down him! Down with the beggar!

MORE (*above the murmurs*) My fine friends, I'm not afraid of you You've forced your way into my house, and you've asked me to speak Put up with the truth for once! (*His words rush out*) You are the thing that pelts the weak, kicks women, howls down free speech This to-day, and that to-morrow Brain—you have none Spirit—not the ghost of it! If you're not meanness, there's no such thing! If you're not cowardice, there is no cowardice (*Above the growing fierceness of the hubbub*) Patriotism—there are two kinds—that of our soldiers, and this of mine You have neither!—(*The Mob*)

This is not realistic speech, but it is dramatic speech.

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Nobody would be likely to say, even in the heat of indignation "You are the thing that pelts the weak, kicks women, howls down free speech" But, as one listens to these words in the theatre, they strike no discordant note, because the intensity of the drama has been brought to such a pitch that the mind is prepared for them

If the day of the well-made play is passing, as many prophets have hinted, it is not because there is anything inherently transient in the form itself, but because latter-day exponents of the form have been apt to show themselves scornful of language They have seized on the words "naturalistic" and "realistic" and used them in justification of their own lack of verbal dexterity, unmindful of the fact that the great "realists" have always been masters of language, which they were able to manipulate to secure an effect of reality

## CHAPTER VII

### THREE FORERUNNERS

IN the history of every art there appear from time to time unaccountable figures who seem to have had no forebears and yet are rich in progeny. In music there was, for instance, Debussy, whose strangely elusive personality found expression in forms and harmonies peculiar to himself; his idiom struck the ear of his own generation like a new language, of which the roots were unknown. Debussy came into existence, apparently, by some kind of spontaneous generation, and achieved such vitality that the course of music was changed through his influence. The other arts offer parallel examples which need not here be specified, and several dramatists have played a similar role.

#### Maeterlinck

One of the less important of these was Maeterlinck. His *Plays for Marionettes*, and plays in the same genre though not so described, such as *Pelléas and Mélisande*, *The Princess Maleine*, and others, rich though they were in charm and suggestion, have not proved to be very prolific of emulators. They were perhaps too personal, too much the vehicle of the author's own psychological and philosophical needs, their approach and content had too little of the universal in them to attract the attention of any but kindred spirits. They had their imitators, of course, but the imitations produced by them were almost exclusively imitations of method and not of the individuality of outlook which gave the method, in Maeterlinck's hands, force and fascination. The Maeterlinck of *The Death of Tantalus*, *The Blind Interior*, and *Pelléas and Mélisande* was a man obsessed by the dark mystery of life, the pervading cruelty and apparent inconsequence of the powers of the universe. Brooding on these things, the dramatist gave birth to characters which

moved dimly in a half-world, like the shadows of puppets manipulated by unseen and for the most part malevolent powers. For all their shadowiness these characters are not wanting in individuality and mesmeric power, it may not be blood that flows in their veins, but it is some energizing fluid, something which galvanizes them into vivid and convincing action. The technique by which Maeterlinck achieved this result is, at its best, rich in poetry and suggestion. The cadences are subtle and much magic dwells between the lines. At its worst, it is a trick—a trick of repetition and mechanical reverberation. The magic needs a magician to emulate, the trick is easy enough to acquire, and, employed without conviction, is as empty as tricks are prone to be. It is not without significance that Maeterlinck himself abandoned his own method at a comparatively early period in his career as a dramatist, and, although his later plays achieved relatively little of the distinction which marked the *Plays for Marionettes*, it may be assumed that he realized that it was not wise to continue to explore a vein which had yielded much fine ore but was showing unmistakable signs of giving out. It is worth while recalling, too, that Debussy's setting of *Pelléas and Mélisande*, a masterpiece in its genre, remains unique, without progeny.

Maeterlinck the dramatist, then, although one of the more interesting of the "sports" that have sprung up from time to time in the history of the drama, had comparatively little influence on the craft of his contemporaries, his own position is assured, but it is likely to be an orphaned and childless one.<sup>1</sup>

### Strindberg

Another "sport" was the Swedish genius Strindberg—not so much the Strindberg of the realistic plays, or of the so-called chamber-plays, or of the historical plays (though it would not always be easy to trace the steps by which these reached their peculiarly individual technique)—as the

<sup>1</sup> See also Chapter X, p. 150 *et seq*

Strindberg of plays like *The Spook Sonata*, *A Dream Play*, and *Towards Damascus*. These are the flowering of a personality, somewhat perverse, somewhat mad, whose genius found utterance in what must be called "pure" theatre. The effect at which they aim is one that can be properly achieved only in the theatre. They do not attempt to give an imitation of life, not even in the sense in which the poet-dramatists attempt to imitate it. Plays by the realists may be said to be one remove from life, the plays of the poets, two removes; the "dream" plays of Strindberg have no apparent link with normal life at all. It is as if the unrestrained ideas and emotions of the playwright were tipped out of his brain in disorder and sorted themselves out as they passed through the crucible of the theatre. To see an imaginative production of *The Spook Sonata* is to be present at the creation of a work of art which excites in much the same way as music excites. It would be scarcely easier to declare what it all means than it would be to ascribe a meaning to the Quartet in C sharp minor, op. 131, of Beethoven. There is an author's note appended to *A Dream Play* which gives some indication of Strindberg's intentions—

In this *Dream Play*, as in his earlier one *To Damascus*, the author has tried to imitate the disjointed but apparently logical form of a dream. Anything may happen, everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist, on an insignificant groundwork of reality imagination spins and weaves new patterns, a mixture of memories, experiences, unfettered fancies, absurdities, and improvisations.

The characters are split, doubled, and multiplied; they evaporate and are condensed, are diffused and concentrated. But a single consciousness holds sway over them all—that of the dreamer, for him there are no secrets, no inconsequences, no scruples, and no law. The dreamer neither condemns nor acquits; he merely relates, and since a dream is usually painful, less frequently cheerful, a tone of melancholy, of sympathy with all that lives, runs through the swaying narrative. Sleep, the liberator, often plays a painful part, but when the pain is at its fiercest comes the awakening to reconcile

the sufferer with reality, which, however agonizing it be, is at the moment a joy compared with the excruciating dream

A quotation from one of these extraordinary plays would serve no purpose. The language in which they are written is not in itself especially remarkable, and a few disjointed speeches would give little or no inkling of the over-all quality of the work and no hint at all of the strange and rather frightening philosophy which pervades it.

It would have been reasonable to assume that an art as individual as this, however attractive in itself, would keep imitators at bay, and indeed it cannot be said that these "dream" plays of Strindberg have ever inspired deliberate imitations. Nevertheless by some curious paradox the range of their influence has extended in all directions, and many of the more "modern" tendencies in the theatre can probably be traced to them. Many authors, who may never have seen a play of Strindberg's, would have expressed themselves differently if he had never written.

The most direct course of development is through Germany, where Strindberg's plays have always been more frequently performed than anywhere else. When the German "expressionists," about whom we shall have more to say in the next chapter, burst so violently upon the horizon of post-War Germany, they had a play-going public whom Strindberg had prepared for them. Ernst Toller, Georg Kaiser, Fritz von Unruh, Walther Hasenclever, and many others threw over realism, and allowed their fancy to wander where it would through various time-dimensions, knowing that Strindberg had done it before them. Strictness of characterization—for which in certain of his plays Strindberg was as great a stickler as Ibsen himself—could be dismissed without feeling a sense of guilt. If, instead of naming their personages, they labelled them *The Woman*, *The Financier*, *The Nameless One*, *The Blue Figures*, *The Yellow Figures*, *First Sailor*, *Second Sailor*, *The Son*, *The Daughter*, and so forth, there was nothing revolutionary about this. Had not Strindberg, in *The Spook Sonata*, listed his *dramatis personae*



as The Old Man, The Milkmaid, The Janitor, The Dead Man, The Lady in Black, etc., and, in *A Dream Play*, The Daughter, The Glazier, The Officer, The Ballet Girl, etc.? The alternating prose and poetry, and something which is neither one nor the other—a characteristic of the Strindberg plays—became a characteristic of the German expressionists' plays also, and the ramifications of the method are so widespread that there are few theatrically-conscious countries which they have not reached. The student will quickly discover how readily American drama reverberated to the new impulse, developing along lines of its own; even English drama, the slowest of all to respond to outside influences, gradually yielded to cosmopolitan pressure, and traces of the Strindberg influence—via German, American, and French expressionism—manifest themselves to-day in the most unlikely quarters. In a word, if the legitimate offspring of Maeterlinckian drama can be counted on the fingers of one hand, he would be a wise and venturesome man who undertook to compute the progeny of the Swedish wizard.

### **Chekhov**

A third "sport," and one more congenial to the British temperament than either Maeterlinck or Strindberg, was Anton Chekhov. It is only since the Great War that Chekhov's plays have found acceptance not only with the connoisseurs in the theatre but also with the general public. The English are beginning to shed some of their illusions about themselves. They are beginning to admit that they are not, generally speaking, the hard-headed, straight-thinking, blunt, unemotional, unimaginative creatures they are supposed to be. John Bull has long since ceased to be a fair representative of our national character. Somewhat surprisingly the English temperament responds, rather shyly but surely, to the plays of Chekhov; there is something about their lack of definiteness, their blurred edges, their kindly melancholy, their inconsequence, and their lack of

discipline which appeals to us. The influence which Chekhov has had on some of our younger dramatists is considerable, it is safe to mention at least one, since he is unfortunately no longer with us. The plays of Ronald MacKenzie—*Musical Chairs* and *The Maitlands*—would certainly never have existed in the form in which they appeared if Chekhov had not provided their prototype. MacKenzie was too gifted a playwright to have gone on writing plays for ever in the Chekhov manner, but it is unlikely that he would ever have shed entirely an influence which seems to have got into his blood. He never made the mistake of imitating Chekhov's manner as well as his manner: he had his own plots and ideas and dreams to sell, and he found a medium roughly Chekhovian congenial for their expression.

The Chekhov method is one of the subtlest instruments the theatre has yet evolved, and it served his purpose perfectly. He never attempted to plumb great philosophic depths, nor to interpret life in terms of excitement and spectacular display. What he wished to do was to reveal human beings to one another. He chose the sphere of society he knew best and did not aspire to depict characters with whom he had had no personal contact. The society upon which he had concentrated much of his time was in its decadence; the seeds of mortality were apparent to the sensitive, arousing that sensation of compassion and distaste which ill-health always creates in the healthy.

Chekhov reacted spontaneously to his generation and was able to re-convey it with perfect sympathy. Chekhov's characters are rarely altogether unsympathetic and rarely altogether sympathetic, more than any other modern dramatist he sees that people are made up of a combination of apparently irreconcilable elements, and he does not attempt to reconcile them. He draws characters with the finesse of a first-class novelist, but, unlike the novelist, has no time or—such is the nature of his chosen medium—scope to expatiate upon their subtleties. The producer of his plays and his actors are confronted with the task of

filling out the author's conception, guided by innumerable finger-posts which should prevent a sufficiently sensitive artist from going astray but might lead a dullard to ridiculous excesses. I understand that when a play of Chekhov's came into Stanislavski's hands in the palmy days of the Moscow Art Theatre he did not straight away put it into rehearsal, but studied it round a table with the whole cast—a process which went on for weeks, perhaps months, before the drastic step of taking the play to the stage was even considered. In this way everybody concerned became so intimately acquainted with the characters that their embodiment on the stage became a comparatively simple matter. Some such flexible method of producing Chekhov's plays would appear to be essential—and I ask myself whether other, humbler, authors would not profit by similar treatment!

The fecklessness and inconsequence of many of Chekhov's characters have provoked the contention that the plays themselves are feckless and inconsequent. Nothing could be more untrue. Few plays can have been more consciously schemed and tautly constructed than Chekhov's best. The thematic material winds in and out of them like the motives of a musical composition, binding them together and weaving the whole into a pattern whose shape can be appreciated only in retrospect. *Three Sisters*, in some ways the most characteristic of all his plays, may be taken as an example. The subject, baldly stated, is futility and frustration. The story is disclosed not in a consecutive narrative, but by the slow revelation of things that have happened in the past and their effect on the present. Events, in themselves, are not important, they are important only in so far as they throw light on character and bring the theme of the play into relief. Here is a group of men and women, coming in and out of each other's lives, uttering their thoughts aloud, sometimes aware and sometimes unaware of the futility of their existence, sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious of the frustration which is spreading a blight on their

lives. The feeling of transiency pervades the whole play, whether it be expressed in the dialogue, in the action, or obliquely through the unjustified optimism and longing for permanence expressed by some of the characters

The keynote is struck in the first speech Olga, one of the three sisters, speaks—

Father died just a year ago, on this very day—the fifth of May, your name-day, Irina It was very cold, snow was falling I felt as though I should not live through it, you lay fainting as though you were dead But now a year has passed and we can think of it calmly, you are already in a white dress, your face is radiant

And before many minutes are passed, she is plunged back into the past—

Father was given his brigade and came here with us from Moscow eleven years ago and I remember distinctly that in Moscow at this time, at the beginning of May, everything was already in flower, it was warm, and everything was bathed in sunshine It's eleven years ago, and yet I remember it all as though we had left it yesterday Oh, dear! I woke up this morning, I saw a blaze of sunshine I saw the spring, and joy stirred in my heart I had a passionate longing to be back at home again!

Here we have the theme stated almost in full, and it is never long out of our ears until the curtain falls on the last act To be something that one is not, to be somewhere that one is not, to be back in the past, or to be in the future; and, finally, the realization that frustration will succeed longing as inevitably as autumn succeeds the summer—that is the theme of *Three Sisters*, and only a virtuoso could have displayed it in such variety and without inducing a sense of monotony

Each of the sisters in turn discloses her longing, born of memories, and all the other characters in their ways contribute to the common theme. Vershinin, the Battery-Commander, theorizes—

Let us suppose that of the hundred thousand people living

in this town, which is, of course, uncultured and behind the times, there are only three of your sort. It goes without saying that you cannot conquer the mass of darkness round you, little by little, as you go on living, you will be lost in the crowd. You will have to give in to it. Life will get the better of you, but still you will not disappear without a trace.

And, in Act 2, when Masha builds up hopes on Moscow—

You won't notice Moscow when you live in it. We have no happiness and never do have, we only long for it.

And, in Act 3, after the outbreak of fire—

And when a little more time has passed—another two or three hundred years—people will look at our present manner of life with horror and deision, and everything of to-day will seem awkward and heavy, and very strange and uncomfortable. Oh, what a wonderful life that will be—what a wonderful life!

A last splutter of optimism comes towards the end—

Life is hard. It seems to many of us blank and hopeless, but yet we must admit that it goes on getting clearer and easier, and it looks as though the time were not far off when it will be full of happiness. In old days men were absorbed in wars, filling all their existence with marches, raids, victories, but now all that is a thing of the past, leaving behind it a great void which there is so far nothing to fill. Humanity is searching for it passionately, and of course will find it.

—and so on. Every character is building on the future or on the past, every character is frustrate in the present—

IRINA I'll be your wife and be faithful and obedient, but there is no love, I can't help it. (*Weeps*) I've never been in love in my life! Oh, I have so dreamed of love, I've been dreaming of it for years, day and night, but my soul is like a wonderful piano of which the key has been lost.

Whether the outlook is one to which one subscribes or not, there can be no doubt about the overwhelming effect which Chekhov by his method is able to produce upon any audience not immune from emotional response. Our interest and sympathy are awakened as soon as the curtain rises, and,

as the music of the regimental band fades away at the end of the play and the three sisters stand with their arms round one another, we cannot fail to identify ourselves with them and their sensations—

IRINA (*lays her head on Olga's bosom*) A time will come when everyone will know what all this is for, why there is this misery, there will be no mysteries and, meanwhile, we have got to live—we have got to work, only to work! To-morrow I shall go alone, I shall teach in the school, and I will give all my life to those to whom it may be of use. Now it's autumn, soon winter will come and cover us with snow, and I will work, I will work.

OLGA (*embraces both her sisters*) The music is so gay, so confident, and one longs for life! Oh my God! Time will pass, and we shall go away for ever, and we shall be forgotten, our voices, and how many there were of us, but our sufferings will pass into joy for those who will live after us, happiness and peace will be established upon earth, and they will remember kindly and bless those who have lived before. Oh, dear sisters, our life is not ended yet. We shall live! The music is so gay, so joyful, and it seems as though a little more and we shall know what we are living for, why we are suffering.

If we only knew—if we only knew!

If all art aspires to a state of music, Chekhov's might almost be said to have achieved it. In thinking of his major plays it is difficult to avoid using musical terminology, themes and counter-themes, refrains, *tempo*—expressions like these seem unavoidable, while the passage quoted above, which winds up and rounds off the story of *Three Sisters*, is like nothing so much as the close of a symphonic work—shall we say Tchaikovsky's "Pathetic" Symphony?

Maeterlinck, Strindberg, and Chekhov provided between them a viaduct by means of which most of the serious dramatic currents flowed from the latter part of the nineteenth century into the twentieth.

## CHAPTER VIII

### SOME POST-WAR TENDENCIES

THE convention of the well-made play, which came into existence only during the latter part of the nineteenth century, has been losing ground ever since the psychological upheaval of which the Great War was either the cause or the expression. The neat compactness of the realistic play, however significant in content, seemed an inadequate vehicle for the tumultuous emotions and feverish gropings of a generation whose ideals had been shattered by a cataclysm so stupendous that all standards of conduct and all bases of judgment had to be reconsidered.

#### **Bernard Shaw**

Most of the established playwrights continued in the technique which they had perfected, for any deviation from the normal is commonly regarded with disfavour by those who have come to accept a convention; others clung to the principal features of their method, but showed their awareness of changing conditions by somewhat tentative innovations. Bernard Shaw, who after the publication of his *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* never again attempted to write a "realistic" play within the meaning of the term as it is usually applied, broke entirely new ground with his first full-length play inspired by the War, *Heartbreak House*. He called it a "Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes," and it was presumably the plays of Chekhov that he had in mind, but there is very little resemblance between *Heartbreak House* and the plays of Chekhov. An apparent inconsequence which conceals a deliberate intention is a characteristic of Chekhov's plays and of *Heartbreak House*, but the resemblance goes little further than that Chekhov, as we have seen, truly endeavoured to place before us a faithful image of life as it is lived, he is, in his results,

the perfect naturalist Where he differed from other and lesser naturalists is that he made significant pattern of apparent inconsequence without sacrificing the appearance of reality The muddle of relationships and of speech, the disjointed utterances with their loose-ends and dead-ends, the whole rag, tag, and bob-tail of life, is shown in a jumble, but, under Chekhov's magical touch, the jumble becomes unified and significant It is as if a lumber-room of odds and ends were reflected, and made a picture of, in a convex mirror

But whereas Chekhov is not endeavouring to express something other than that bit of life which appears on his stage, Shaw, in *Heartbreak House*, is not really concerned at all with his odd collection of characters *as individuals* They are assembled in a house fashioned like a ship—itsself a symbol—and each of them represents or symbolizes some force, some tendency, some danger in pre-War European—and particularly English—society Only the author himself could reveal all the ramifications of the ideas that *Heartbreak House* contains, but the careful student will come away with a good many of them, and, whether he accepts Shaw's philosophical and political conclusions or not, he will not fail to admire the virtuosity and ingenuity of the technique *Heartbreak House* is cultured Europe before the War—Europe given up to a futile dilettantism, an elegant crust over a seething whirl of disruptive forces—proletarian discontent, capitalist callousness, militarist arrogance “Cultured” Europeans lived their lives without aim or direction, shielding themselves from reality by an indulgence in the lesser arts, by an academic and superficial interest in social subjects without relating them to life, and in elegant trivialities of all kinds To a house such as this, disaster was bound to come The disaster was the War. Thus, in brief, I should state the theme of *Heartbreak House* It was Shaw's message to his times a warning against trifling, against lack of seriousness and lack of faith The method he chose for conveying the message was much criticized at the time of the



play's production, and, being so abstruse, it did not serve its immediate purpose. One passage reveals the chief purport of the play, and is couched in language which does not conceal its meaning—

*(The first enemy aircraft is heard and the denizens of Heartbreak House, in their several ways, are awaiting possible destruction )*

CAPTAIN SHOTOVER The captain is in his bunk, drinking bottled ditch-water, and the crew is gambling in the fore-castle. She will strike and sink and split. Do you think the laws of God will be suspended in favour of England because you were born in it?

HECTOR Well, I don't mean to be drowned like a rat in a trap. I still have the will to live. What am I to do?

CAPTAIN SHOTOVER Do? Nothing simpler. Learn your business as an Englishman.

HECTOR And what may my business as an Englishman be, pray?

CAPTAIN SHOTOVER Navigation. Learn it and live, or leave it and be damned.

This passage, symbolical though it be—or perhaps it would be more accurate to describe it as metaphorical—leaves no one in doubt of its meaning, but much of the play is somewhat obscure at first hearing, and only the established playwright is permitted more than one hearing. The technique of *Heartbreak House*, so far as I know, has encouraged no imitators.

### John Galsworthy

John Galsworthy, the War over, also appeared in a new light. His reputation had rested chiefly upon his unusual power of stating social problems impartially in well-made plays containing much subtlety of characterization, delicate observation, and a philosophy in which compassion played a predominating part. With his first considerable play after the War, *The Skin Game*, he abandoned some of his subtlety and some of his delicacy, employing a technique in which the strokes were broader, and, superficially, more obvious. The

play deals with the conflict between the aristocrats and the commercial magnates represented by Hillcrist, the refined, self-satisfied, but charming landowner, and Hornblower, the vulgar, pushing, rapacious, but good-natured business man. Hillcrist, heir to a long tradition of refinement, wishes to preserve the dignities, beauty, and amenities of the English country-side and incidentally his own cross-country view, Hornblower, in the interests of industry (and, of course, to his own benefit), wishes to develop the commercial possibilities of the land where his factory is. The conflict between these two men is really the conflict between two opposing forces as they exist in the world to-day, in this conflict Galsworthy finds a subject after his own heart and exploits it to the full. But he, like the Shaw of *Heartbreak House*, showed himself aware of new currents in the theatrical stream. For the first time he consciously employed a fairly close symbolism. It will be found that *The Skin Game* is from beginning to end a close parallel to the Great War<sup>1</sup>. In *The Forest* Galsworthy also employed a symbolist technique, the forest of the title being the great imperialist jungle in which individuals are caught up and destroyed, but here the symbolism is not carried out so consistently or so closely as in *The Skin Game*. In other later plays—*Escape* and *The Roof*—Galsworthy's response to the influences at work in the theatre is also shown, an influence for which the cinematograph is perhaps also partly responsible.

But, generally speaking, it was not the older, established generation of playwrights who revolted against the hide-bound realism which had been threatening to stunt the growth of theatrical development; it was the newcomers, and particularly in Germany, who more deliberately cast off the shackles of the realistic method and endeavoured to create new forms. Some of them were entirely unsuccessful, some of them produced, as if by a fluke, interesting works which have remained without progeny, and some of them evolved new methods which enabled them to extend the

<sup>1</sup> See *John Galsworthy*, by the present author (Chapman & Hall)

scope of theatrical art as well as to enrich our knowledge of human nature

### Expressionism

Theorizing was rife among these young people, and among the many new words which came into existence at this time "expressionism" was the most employed and least understood. It was apt to be used to connote all forms of dramatic art save the realistic, dramatists as diverse as Pirandello, the brothers Čapek, Ernst Toller, and Georg Kaiser were lumped together indiscriminately and labelled "expressionists," and in certain quarters the word was used as a term of abuse. There is probably only a handful of plays that could be justly labelled expressionist, though there are many that bear traces of the expressionist method. One of the most famous expressionist plays, Georg Kaiser's *Gas*, may be taken as a good representative specimen of the method, exemplifying both its weakness and its strength.

The expressionist endeavours to show you *the thing in itself*, shorn of such impedimenta as character-drawing, realistic local colour, or normal plausibility. He does not aim at creating human characters: his object is rather to create a series of platonic ideas and show them in relation to one another, or a series of attributes, attitudes, and tendencies, or states of mind separated from their possessors. For this reason the *dramatis personae* are not often given names, for that would particularize them: they are labelled in such a way as to indicate their status or function. In *Gas* we have The Engineer, The Gentleman in White, The Billionaire's Son, First Gentleman in Black, The Girl, The Woman, The Mother, and so forth. To make the technique clear it would be well to give here some indication of the theme of the play. The Engineer, then, has invented a formula for making a gas which shall be an all-powerful motive force. The formula has been tested—it works and yet it does not work. *Gas* presumably symbolizes those forces in modern civilization which appear to work but in reality fail, forces

which make for material success yet lead to spiritual disaster. The reader will have no difficulty in fixing on forces which can be so docketed. The play opens with the appearance to The Clerk of The Gentleman in White, who may be taken as a symbol of terror. Tension is quickly created and culminates very soon in an explosion: the factory is razed to the ground, thousands of workers are maimed or killed. That commodity which they had been slaving to produce had wrought their destruction. The Billionaire's Son (the Idealist), beholding the ruins (Europe after the War, one may assume), seeks to build anew, discarding the old formulas, but The Engineer will not admit any fault in his calculations. There are exciting scenes which give scope for the rapid interplay of conflicting ideas, and the climax comes when the workers, having to choose between The Billionaire's Son (the idealist) and The Engineer (purveyor of old destructive ideas), again choose the latter, acclaiming, as is the way of mobs, the one whom they had formerly reviled.

This bald résumé of the plot is not fair to the play, but my immediate intention is less to interpret the author's ideas than to attempt to show how the expressionist method works. Generally speaking, it does not lend itself to subtlety; the symbolism is apt to be obvious lest it should be misunderstood, and, in denying himself the right to exploit the infinite varieties of human personality, the expressionist robs himself of one of the most potent ingredients of the dramatist's magic brew. Whether what he gains in directness is compensation for this loss is a question upon which I do not propose to arbitrate. There have been several excellent plays in the expressionist idiom, and many very poor ones. The same generalization can be made about plays in every dramatic technique which man's ingenuity has hitherto invented. Perhaps, when the term "expressionist" has passed from current use, some future historian of the theatre will be able to assess the value of the expressionists' contribution to the evolution of theatrical technique.

Ernst Toller, in *Masse Mensch* (*Masses and Men*), also employed an expressionist method, and showed what could be done with it in the hands of an author with an unfailing sense of the dramatic, a mastery of poetic diction, and an emotional power capable of arousing an audience to almost unbridled enthusiasm. In *Masses and Men*, as in *Gas* by Kaiser, the persons of the play are not characterized. Each of them is a symbol, a force, an idea, but the flaming intensity of the dialogue, rising frequently to poetry of a high order, and the vividness of the imagination in developing the theme, made characterization unnecessary.

Expressionism, rightly so called, is obviously limited in its applicability, and it is doubtful if any playwrights are now employing it exclusively. Like cubism in the plastic arts, its influence has outlasted itself, the course of many of the most significant playwrights would have been quite different if expressionism had never existed. Its chief claim to our thanks is that it pointed the way of escape from the bonds of realism, many others have since been discovered. Toller himself has never written another entirely expressionist play, nor has he ever written another realistic play. *The Machine Wreckers* has scenes that are roughly realistic and others that are not, in which passages like the following occur—

Oh, what you call virtue, the law of the nature, the commandment of the strong,  
Is the name of the demon which leads you from war to war,  
To war against blood brothers,  
to war of People against People,  
to war of Race against Race,  
to war of Continent against Continent,  
to war, in truth, of all against all,  
to war against your Selves —(Trans Ashley Dukes)

In *Hoppla, wir leben!*, a play about the Berlin revolution of 1919, he made use of a mixture which, in the hands of a producer of genius, Erwin Piscator, was brilliantly effective.

There is not space here even to mention the many innovations which he introduced into this play. Scenes which are relatively realistic are interspersed with "cinematographic interludes," showing the uprising of the people, factories with streams of workers, and so on. One act is set in a hotel, of which all the rooms are visible to the audience simultaneously, the lights darting about from one room to another as the action shifts, another scene shows a number of prison cells, and curious mechanical devices were invented to show the means by which prisoners communicated with one another. The dialogue, never entirely realistic, sometimes breaks all bounds and becomes frankly rhapsodical. The chief character, Karl Thomas, dazed by the world in which he finds himself after some years' incarceration, soliloquizes aloud—

You see a house on fire, seize a pail and want to put it out,  
and instead of water you pour oil on the flames

When others creep into the shadowy bosom of the night,  
I see murderers lurking everywhere, the evil workings of their  
brains exposed to my gaze

I have lost my hold on the world

The world has lost its hold on me —(Trans H O)

It is perhaps in this matter of dialogue that the revulsion from realism is strongest, and I suppose it would be fairly safe to prophesy that the days of attempted verisimilitude in language are numbered. Its best early exponents in England—Stanley Houghton, Elizabeth Baker, Harold Brighouse, for example—wear a somewhat old-fashioned air nowadays, and even the artistic compromise effected by such authors as Galsworthy, Granville-Barker, and Somerset Maugham, whose feeling for words forbade them to reflect too faithfully the language of common speech, is unlikely to hold sway much longer. A language which was once at the service of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Beaumont and Fletcher, Dryden, Congreve, Goldsmith, and Sheridan will not for ever tolerate a convention which clips its wings, stunts its growth, and limits its medium of expression to a

common denominator imposed by the unenlightened and the inarticulate Poets will victoriously enter the theatre again when the world realizes that without them the theatre is a body without a soul Meantime, they are creeping in by the back entrances, insinuating their gifts slyly, as if ashamed of them, instead of openly and proudly.

### Sean O'Casey

There is Sean O'Casey, for instance Having achieved success with two or three realistic plays, in which the poet was for the most part in shackles, he disclosed his hand in *The Silver Tassie* For perhaps two-thirds of its length it is naturalistic, but the second act is openly poetic—some would say expressionistic In this we are shown the War, not as it physically was, but made manifest by language intensified and heightened to express the emotion of war "The Croucher" intones dreamily—

And the hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in  
the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley  
And when the soldiers come in from fatigue, they do not  
address one another in the unrevealing speech of exhausted  
tommies, but chant-wise, thus—

FIRST SOLDIER Cold and wet and tir'd

SECOND SOLDIER Wet and tir'd and cold

THIRD SOLDIER Tir'd and cold and wet.

FOURTH SOLDIER Twelve blasted hours of ammunition  
transport fatigue !

FIRST SOLDIER Twelve weary hours.

SECOND SOLDIER And wasting hours

THIRD SOLDIER And hot and heavy hours

FIRST SOLDIER Toiling and thinking to build the wall of force  
that blocks the way from here to home

Chants and rhythmic speech make up the whole of the act—

THIRD SOLDIER Where hot with the sweat of mad endeavour,  
Crouching to scrape a toy-deep shelter,  
Quick-tim'd by hell's fast, frenzied drumfire,  
Exploding in flaming death around us

SECOND SOLDIER God, unchanging, heart-sicken'd,  
shuddering,  
Gathereth the darkness of the night sky  
To mask His paling countenance from  
The blood-dance of His self-slaying children  
THIRD SOLDIER Stems of light shoot through the darkness,  
Fierce flowering to green and crimson star-shells  
Glowing their eyes of hate where once  
Danced the gentle star of Bethlehem

The last act, superficially realistic, also snaps its bonds, and mingled with normal speech we find a passage in free verse like this—

TEDDY The hues of branch or leaf I'll never see  
HARRY There's something wrong with life when men can  
walk  
TEDDY There's something wrong with life when men can  
see  
HARRY Life came and took away the half of life  
TEDDY Life took from me the half he left with you  
HARRY The Lord hath given and the Lord hath taken away  
TEDDY Blessed be the name of the Lord

Sean O'Casey's later play, *Within the Gates*, outstrips even *The Silver Tassie* in its disregard of literal verisimilitude. Formal scenery, formalized costumes; chorus and solo songs, symbolism and realism; poetry and plain prose—all have their place in a work which tentative and ill-digested as it is, is likely to hold a permanent place in the history of English drama.

### Elmer Rice

The intense vitality of the American theatre was one of the most enheartening of post-War phenomena. Experiments of varying degrees of importance were made, more in staging perhaps than in writing, but the dramatists were not unaware of the new impulses surging in the world of the theatre. Elmer Rice, who had written several successful



melodramas, and has since written many noteworthy plays in a number of different mediums, first demanded serious attention with his play, *The Adding Machine*, in which he used a somewhat confused technique to inveigh against an age which threatens to make machines of men. The play was a mixture of realism, expressionism, and something which was neither one nor the other, but an amalgam of poetry and fantasy. The transition from one plane to another was not always convincingly fused or contrasted, but there is much that is theatrically effective in the play. It is manifestly the work of an alert mind which is keenly aware of the needs and possibilities of theatrical expression. The play's kinship with the work of the German expressionists is quite clear. The characters either have no names at all, or fantastic non-realistic names, thus Mr Zero and Mrs Zero, The Boss, Mr One and Mrs One, Mr Two and Mrs Two, and so on up to Mr and Mrs Six. When the wage-slave, Mr Zero, in a fit of passionate resentment loses control and kills his Boss, the effect of the incident on his mind is shown by the hullabaloo of noises which accompany the deed. The stage revolves—

*Zero and the Boss face each other. They are entirely motionless save for the Boss's jaws, which open and close incessantly. But the words are inaudible. The music swells and swells. To it is added every off-stage effect of the theatre: the wind, the waves, the galloping horse, the locomotive siren, the glass-crash, New Year's Eve, Election Night, the Mardi Gras. The noise is deafening, maddening, unendurable. Suddenly it culminates in a terrific peal of thunder. For an instant there is a flash of red and then everything is plunged into blackness.*

In other words, Mr Zero has murdered The Boss.

Mr Elmer Rice's experience as a successful writer of melodramas made him fertile ground upon which to sow the seeds of expressionism. The de-humanizing of characters so that they are classifiable as villains, heroes, saints, and sinners is characteristic of the old Miracle plays, as well as of the Victorian melodrama, and, to a large extent, of the German expressionists. This description of the entrance

of the friends of Mrs Zero is a typical example of the expressionist method—

*Six men and women file into the room in a double column The men are all shapes and sizes, but their dress is identical with that of Zero in every detail Each, however, wears a wig of a different colour The women are all dressed alike, too, except that the dress of each is of a different colour*

After a formalized exchange of greetings,

*the files now separate, each man taking a chair from the right wall Each sex forms a circle with the chairs very close together The men—all except Zero—smoke cigars The women munch chocolates*

Where Mr Elmer Rice steals a march on some of his German colleagues is in his possession of a sense of humour They would have made the phrasing of the conversation similarly uniform, but would not have given it the amusing twist with which the American author endows his—

MRS SIX My aunt has gall-stones  
 MRS FIVE My husband has bunions  
 MRS FOUR My sister expects next month  
 MRS THREE My cousin's husband has erysipelas  
 MRS TWO My niece has St Vitus's dance  
 MRS ONE My boy has fits

### Eugene O'Neill

America was rich in theatrical experience during the two decades which followed the Armistice of 1918, and can present an honourable roll of accomplished dramatists. Most of them, like their European brothers, have cast their work in more or less traditional mould, but there have been exceptions It is Eugene O'Neill who stands head and shoulders above other American dramatists for the originality of his ideas and the venturesomeness of his technique, for his superb vitality and astonishing versatility Even his earliest plays, nominally naturalistic, showed signs of impatience with the medium, and it was not long before he threw over conventional forms without apology and steered a course of his own *The Emperor Jones*, which was the first

of his plays to create something of a sensation, is far removed from the well-made play even as contrived by the more advanced exploiters of that form, while *The Harry Ape* might legitimately be labelled expressionistic. Its hero, a gigantic stoker on an ocean liner, is no normal human being, but the embodiment of brute power proud of itself and aware of its own importance. The language employed in this play is not the language of ordinary human beings, although based on Yankee slang, it is raised to almost poetic heights. Thus—

Sure, only for me everything stops. It all goes dead, get me!  
De noise and smoke and all the engines movin' de woid, dey stop.  
Dere ain't nothin' no more! Dat's what I'm sayin'.  
Everything else dat makes de woid move, somep'n makes it move.  
It can't move without somep'n else, see? Den yeh get down to me.  
I'm at the bottom, get me? Dere ain't nothin' foithur.  
I'm de end! I'm de start! I start somep'n and de woid moves.  
It—dat's me! De new dat's moirdern de old.  
I'm de ting in coal dat makes it boin, I'm steam and oil for de engines,  
I'm de ting in noise dat makes you hear it, I'm smoke and express trains and steamers and factory whistles,  
I'm de ting in gold that makes it money. And I'm what makes iron into steel!  
Steel, dat stands for de whole ting! And I'm steel—steel—steel!  
I'm de muscle in steel, de punch behind it!

Since *The Harry Ape* O'Neill has gone from experiment to experiment, each of them interesting, though not all of them completely successful. One of the most remarkable is the introduction of spoken thoughts in *Strange Interlude*. I have seen it suggested that this is merely a revival of the aside and the soliloquy, conventions which were promptly abandoned with the advent of the naturalistic play, but the suggestion is more plausible than convincing. The naive interjections of which the old asides consisted bear no relation to the method by which O'Neill enables the audience to follow the intricate ramifications of his characters' thoughts and to share in the omniscience of the author. Compare the Sheridan asides. "Gad's life, here's Lady Teazle!"

"Gad, I must stop him!", "Would I were well up to the chin in a horse-pond!", and the like, with the O'Neill spoken thoughts, and it will be at once apparent that the two things have only the most superficial resemblance. The following passage, not particularly typical but short enough for quotation, gives some indication of the method—

(*Doctor Edmund Darrell, taking a prescription pad from his pocket, hastily scratches on it*)

MARSDEN (*thinking sneeringly*) Amusing, these young doctors! perspire with the effort to appear cool! writing a prescription cough medicine for the corpse, perhaps! good-looking? . . . More or less . . . attractive to women, I dare say

DARRELL (*tears it off—hands it to Evans, SAYS*).

Here, Sam Run along up the street and get this filled

EVANS (*with relief, SAYS*) Sure Glad of the chance for a walk  
(*He goes out, rear*)

DARRELL (*turning to Marsden, SAYS*) It's for Nina She's got to get some sleep to-night (*He sits down abruptly in the chair at centre Marsden unconsciously takes the Professor's place behind the table The two men stare at each other for a moment, Darrell with a frank, probing, examining look that ruffles Marsden and makes him all the more resentful toward him*) (*THINKS*) This Marsden doesn't like me . . . that's evident but he interests me . . . read his books . . . wanted to know his bearing on Nina's case . . . his novels just well-written surface no depth, no digging underneath why? has the talent but doesn't dare afraid he'll meet himself somewhere . . . one of those poor devils who spend their lives trying not to discover which sex they belong to!

MARSDEN (*THINKS*). Giving me the fishy, diagnosing eye they practise at medical school . . . like freshmen from Ioway cultivating broad A's at Harvard! . . . what is his speciality? neurologist, I think . . . I hope not psychoanalyst . . . a lot to account for, Herr Freud! punishment to fit his crimes, be forced to listen eternally during breakfast while innumerable plain ones tell him dreams about snakes pah, what an easy cure-all! . . . sex the

philosopher's stone . . . "O Œdipus, O my king! The world is adopting you!"

DARRELL (*THINKS*) Must pitch into him about Nina . . . have to have his help . . . damn little time to convince him . . . he's the kind you have to explode a bomb under to get them to move . . . but not too big a bomb they blow to pieces easily . . . (*Brusquely, SAYS*) Nina's gone to pot again! Not that her father's death is a shock in the usual sense of grief I wish to God it were! No, it's a shock because it's finally convinced her she can't feel anything any more That's what she's doing upstairs now—trying to goad herself into feeling something

I have added the *thinks* and *says* for clearness's sake; but not the *points de suspension*, "—"—these appear in the original text From the above quotation it is sufficiently obvious that the asides are just as important as the speeches themselves and that the development of the characters is much more explicit and overt than it could have been if the author had employed the customary elliptical method whereby suggestion, innuendo, and inter-action plus conversation are expected to bear the full burden For plays in which the psychological content is paramount, the method has much to recommend it In *Strange Interlude* the spoken thoughts sometimes give the impression of being redundant, and often one feels that they might have been conveyed more convincingly by the actor in silence; but there are other moments when the author produces an effect so illuminating that the lapses seem of little moment by comparison Nobody who saw it will forget the scene in which Nina, the woman who has attracted so many men, absorbed them each in their several ways, sits and broods over them like some sated tarantula In a straight play, in which conversation or physical action of some sort must be taking place, such a scene could have no place. Here we have a stageful of people, all silent, all thinking, and, by a convention which, after a few minutes' familiarity, any intelligent audience is willing to accept, we are permitted to hear their thoughts

NINA (*more and more strangely triumphant*) My three men!  
 I feel their desires converge in me! to form one  
 complete beautiful male desire which I absorb and  
 am whole they dissolve in me, their life is my life  
 . I am pregnant with the three! husband!  
 lover! father! and the fourth man! little  
 man! little Gordon! he is mine, too!  
 that makes it perfect! (*With an extravagant suppressed  
 exultance*) Why, I should be the proudest woman on earth!  
 I should be the happiest woman in the world!  
 (*Then suppressing an outbreak of hysterical triumphant laughter  
 only by a tremendous effort*) Ha-ha only I better knock  
 wood (*she raps with both knuckles in a fierce tattoo on the  
 table*) before God the Father hears my happiness!  
 EVANS (*as the three turn to her—anxiously*) Nina? What's the  
 matter?

There is an obvious connexion between these long utterances and the Shakespeare soliloquies, Hamlet's tormented, irresolute spirit could hardly have been indicated but not expressed between the lines of the dialogue, some sort of soliloquy was inevitable. But O'Neill, in his employment of the soliloquy, attempts not only to remove the veil which would cover his characters' thoughts when they are alone, but to indicate the rapid flow of impressions which the characters make upon one another.

Another, earlier, play of his to which it is necessary to make extended reference, *The Great God Brown*, uses a device for the first time which is, in a sense, an extension of the soliloquy and aside. Masks have been used in the theatre for thousands of years, but always hitherto in order to fix and, as it were, to stereotype a character, the intention being to make the task of the audience easier. Villainy wore its appropriate mask, virtue likewise. O'Neill's use of masks has nothing in common with this attempt at simplification. He gives masks only to the more important characters who, when they are not using them to conceal their own faces, usually wear them suspended from the neck. I have not been able to discover that the method is entirely

consistent, it would appear that the mask is used sometimes for one purpose and sometimes for another, and considerable mental agility is exacted from a reader (I have not seen a performance of the play) who would have a clear conception of the author's aim. At the beginning one feels that the masks are worn in order that the characters may show the world, and their immediate companions, faces which belie their real nature. On his first entrance the hero, Dion, is masked—

*The mask is a fixed forcing of his own face—dark, spiritual, poetic, passionately supersensitive, helplessly unprotected in its childlike, religious faith in life—into the expression of a mocking, reckless, defiant, gaily scoffing and sensual young Pan*

The heroine, Margaret, when she first enters, also wears a mask—

*an exact, almost transparent reproduction of her own features, but giving her the abstract quality of a girl instead of the individual Margaret*

So far, the method offers no difficulties. It is easy to adjust one's mind to the notion that when Dion and Margaret are unmasked they are declaring their real thoughts and emotions, and when masked are literally showing a face to the world which in some degree conceals the truth. This is only a way of emphasizing the fact known to us all, that some people are too sensitive and unsure of themselves and others, too much lacking in essential honesty, to exist without a façade. Dion and Margaret are afraid to see each other as they really are. When he is ready to remove his mask and be his real self, she is not, and vice versa. The use of masks, therefore, is only another device for enabling characters to speak their thoughts aloud. Mr O'Neill had the wisdom to declare himself early in the play. Dion, in the Prologue, throws off his mask for a moment when he is alone, revealing his real face—"shrinking, shy and gentle, full of a deep sadness"—

Why am I afraid to dance, I who love music and rhythm and grace and song and laughter? Why am I afraid to live, I who love life and the beauty of flesh and the living colours

of earth and sky and sea? Why am I afraid of love, I who love love? Why am I afraid, I who am not afraid? Why was I born without a skin, O God, that I must wear armour in order to touch or to be touched?

If the method had gone no further than this, it might have been urged that it gave us nothing which good acting and the soliloquy could give. But it is not very long before Mr O'Neill leaves simplicity behind, the mask ceases to be a trick for distinguishing between sincerity and insincerity, and becomes a thing itself, a *simulacrum* existing apart from the character it has aided in deception. In the course of a somewhat complex plot, the mask of Dion is assumed by Brown, and reality—never on very sure ground in this play—entirely loses its bearings. We find Brown stripping off his own mask—the façade, that is, behind which he conceals his own true character—and addressing the mask of Dion, which (Dion dead) he had assumed in order to win the love of Margaret—

Then you—the I in you—I will live with Margaret ever after (*More tauntingly*) She will have children by me! (*He seems to hear some mocking denial from the mask. He bends towards it*) What? (*Then with a sneer*) Anyway, that doesn't matter! Your children already love me more than they ever loved you! And Margaret loves me more! You think you've won, do you—that I've got to vanish into you in order to love? Not yet, my friend! Never! Wait! Gradually Margaret will love what is beneath—me!

*The Great God Brown* is an experiment in dramatic technique which, on paper, cannot be said to be convincing. The fluctuating purpose of the masks, the apparent realism of dialogue which is frequently contradicted by passages which bear little relation to realism in speech, to say nothing of the emphasis on psychological action, would have justified us in assuming that the play was one for the study and not for the stage. But it is never safe to assume that one knows better than a practised dramatist. *The Great God Brown* proved to be one of the most successful plays ever produced



by the New York Theatre Guild, under whose auspices it ran for more than a year. At the time of its creation, O'Neill wrote a letter to the Press in which he "explained" his aim. The letter is long, but is so interesting that all readers of *The Great God Brown* ought to have an opportunity of seeing it. So far as I am aware, it has not been printed in England, and that is my reason for giving it here in full—

I realize that when a playwright takes to explaining he thereby automatically places himself "in the dock." But where an open-faced avowal by the play itself of the abstract theme underlying it is made impossible by the very nature of that hidden theme, then perhaps it is justifiable for the author to confess the mystical pattern which manifests itself as an overtone in *The Great God Brown*, dimly behind and beyond the words and actions of the characters.

I had hoped the names chosen for my people would give a strong hint of this. (An old scheme, admitted—Shakespeare and multitudes since.) Dion Anthony—Dionysus and St Anthony—the creative pagan acceptance of life, fighting eternal war with the masochistic, life-denying spirit of Christianity as represented by St Anthony—the whole struggle resulting in this modern day in mutual exhaustion—creative joy in life for life's sake frustrated, rendered abortive, distorted by morality from Pan into Satan, into a Mephistopheles mocking himself in order to feel alive, Christianity, once heroic in martyrs for its intense faith now pleading weakly for intense belief in anything, even Godhead itself. (In the play it is Cybele, the pagan Earth Mother, who makes the assertion with authority "Our Father, Who Art!" to the dying Brown, as it is she who tries to inspire Dion Anthony with her certainty in life for its own sake.)

Margaret is my image of the modern direct descendant of the Marguerite of Faust—the eternal girl-woman with a virtuous simplicity of instinct, properly oblivious to everything but the means to her end of maintaining the race.

Cybel is an incarnation of Cybele, the Earth Mother doomed to segregation as a pariah in a world of unnatural laws, but patronized by her segregators, who are thus themselves the first victims of their laws.

Brown is the visionless demi-god of our new materialistic myth—a Success—building his life of exterior things, inwardly empty and resourceless, an uncreative creature of superficial preordained social grooves, a by-product forced aside into slack waters by the deep main current of life-desire

Dion's mask of Pan which he puts on as a boy is not only a defence against the world for the supersensitive painter-poet underneath it, but also an integral part of his character as the artist. The world is not only blind to the man beneath, but it also sneers at and condemns the Pan-mask it sees. After that Dion's inner self retrogresses along the line of Christian resignation until it partakes of the nature of the Saint while at the same time the outer Pan is slowly transformed by his struggle with reality into Mephistopheles. It is as Mephistopheles he falls stricken at Brown's feet after having condemned Brown to destruction by willing him his mask, but, this mask falling off as he dies, it is the Saint who kisses Brown's feet in abject contrition and pleads as a little boy to a big brother to tell him a prayer.

Brown has always envied the creative life force in Dion—what he himself lacks. When he steals Dion's mask of Mephistopheles he thinks he is gaining the power to live creatively, while, in reality, he is only stealing that creative power made self-destructive by complete frustration. This devil of mocking doubt makes short work of him. It enters him, rending him apart torturing and transfiguring him until he is even forced to wear a mask of his Success, William A. Brown, before the world, as well as Dion's mask toward wife and children. Thus Billy Brown becomes not himself to any one. And thus he partakes of Dion's anguish—more poignantly, for Dion has the Mother, Cybele—and in the end out of this anguish his soul is born, a tortured Christian soul such as the dying Dion's begging for belief, and at the last finding it on the lips of Cybel.

And now for an explanation regarding this explanation. It was far from my idea in writing 'Brown' that this background pattern of conflicting tides in the soul of Man should ever overshadow and thus throw out of proportion the living drama of the recognizable human beings Dion, Brown, Margaret, and Cybel. I meant it always to be mystically within and behind them, giving them a significance beyond themselves,

forcing itself through them to expression in mysterious words, symbols, actions they do not themselves comprehend And that is as clearly as I wish an audience to comprehend it It is Mystery—the mystery any one man or woman can feel but not understand as the meaning of any event—or accident—in any life on earth And it is this mystery I want to realize in the theatre The solution, if there ever be any, will probably have to be produced in a test tube and turn out to be discouragingly undramatic

All things considered, it would probably be fair to say that Eugene O'Neill is the most powerful force in the theatre to-day His knowledge of the human character, particularly in its more morbid activities, is wide and profound, his vitality appears to be unlimited, and through the murkiness of his themes there shines a bright faith in human beings and admiration for human endeavour His experiments are not always convincing, but they are almost invariably interesting and worth making He shows an eager awareness of vital tendencies in the theatre, but he is not theory-ridden, and often the poet in him transcends the conscious manipulator of novel ideas His weakness is his language It is only rarely, and when he is striving least, that his language rises to the heights of his emotional exaltation He often feels as a poet and writes like a journalist

### French Innovators

Expressionism has not found many converts in France, though even there its influence cannot be overlooked, and several French playwrights, whose work is otherwise unclassifiable, would come within an elastic definition of the term "expressionism" *Têtes de Rechange*, by Jean-Victor Pellérin, follows the approved lines of the expressionists, as this brief quotation shows—

OPÉKU In — other — words — my — uncle — on — the  
father's — side — Eustache — O — pé — ku . That's  
— where — I — started — a — very — modest — start —  
nothing — could — have — been — more — mod.

*(But one hears no more All one sees is his mouth forming the syllables in the air*

*Simultaneously, IXE, sitting motionless in his armchair, sees the right wall of the stage disappear And down below—down below, in a place bathed in a light which produces an atmosphere of unreality, four couples file past, dancing*

*Boys and girls in their early youth Movements regular and somewhat jerky, like automatons Strongly differentiated by costumes and manners, the four couples—which take no notice of one another—consist of townspeople, peasants, shop-assistants, work-people At first one only hears a confused whispering, which later gains in distinctness Continuous crescendo )*

YOUNG MAN No. 1, to his partner I love you

GIRL No 2, to her cavalier And I

YOUNG MAN No 3, to his partner I—I—

GIRL No 4, to her cavalier Adore you

YOUNG MAN No 1 Come here

GIRL No 2 Quite near

YOUNG MAN No 3 Nearer

GIRL No 4 Again

YOUNG MAN No 1 Ours

GIRL No 2 The true

YOUNG MAN No 3 The only

GIRL No 4 Happiness

YOUNG MAN No 1 Your eyes

GIRL No 2 Your mouth .

YOUNG MAN No 3 And then

GIRL No 4 Your heart

YOUNG MAN No 1 Dream

GIRL No 2 Of the waltz

YOUNG MAN No 3 Soul in .

GIRL No 4 Folly

YOUNG MAN No 1: Oh, yes

YOUNG MAN No 2 Say it again . . .

GIRL No 3 I, the .

YOUNG MAN No 4. Darling!

EIGHT DOUBLE KISSES Phew! Phew! . . .

EIGHT DOUBLE SIGHS Ah, ah! . .

YOUNG MAN No 1 To love . .

GIRL No 2 Love.

YOUNG MAN No 3 Always

GIRL No 4 Again

YOUNG MAN No 1 Again

GIRL No 2 Always<sup>1</sup>

YOUNG MAN No 3 Always

YOUNG MAN No 4 Again

THE YOUNGEST OF THE GIRLS, *like an appoggiatura* Again

(Trans H O)

But expressionism and its ramifications have not materially changed the surface of French drama, although the expressionist producers have not failed to influence production in Paris as elsewhere—but that is another, and irrelevant, story. The French are more faithfully wedded to tradition even than the British, and experiments are even more sporadic with them than with us. Significant pioneering work has been done, however, by authors who have deviated from traditional paths untempted by the expressionists. H. R. Lenormand, for instance, far from showing any tendency to disregard the subtleties of characterization, has probed deep into the sources of behaviour and found inspiration in the theories of the psychologists, and particularly in psycho-analysis, in this he shows some kinship with O'Neill, but there is little else to relate the Frenchman to the American.

The art of Jean-Jacques Bernard is even further removed from expressionism. His plays are remarkable for their delicacy and for an intangibility infinitely removed from the bludgeoning methods of the more blatant expressionists. His plots have an artful simplicity which might lead the unwary to assume that they are almost childishly ingenuous. In reality, his work abounds in overtones which can be heard only if the ear is attuned to the delicacy of his medium. He asks for a producer and for actors who are as responsive to subtle experiences as he is himself, and for an audience that will listen with the mind as well as with the ears. He has been credited with basing his work on a "*théorie du*

*silence*," but has properly repudiated the suggestion on the grounds that no serious artist works to a theory but follows the dictates of his artistic conscience. He seems to share with Maeterlinck the belief that the theatre is above all the art of the unexpressed, the action of his plays might almost be said to take place between the speeches. From this it will be readily perceived that his method is as far removed from that of expressionism as it well could be. He places a set of characters before the audience, and shows them in their apparent relationships; but it is largely in what is *not* said, *not* done, that the theme of the play consists. He demands that his audience shall be aware of the intangible Something which comes to birth when one personality impinges on another. "The theatre has no worse enemy than literature," he once said, literature "expresses and dilutes what should only be suggested." Although this statement reveals a strange misunderstanding of the function of literature, and would, if accepted, disqualify the work of most major dramatists, it is a useful indication of Jean-Jacques Bernard's attitude to the theatre and helps to an appreciation of his own elusive work, with its impalpable atmosphere of other-worldly beauty.

In this chapter I have tried to give an outline of some of the more important currents in the post-War theatre. Many well known and distinguished dramatists have not been alluded to at all—not because their work is unimportant, but because, as I see it, it has not revealed new paths in theatrical technique, or has revealed paths down which none of their brother dramatists have sought to follow them. Luigi Pirandello might perhaps have engaged our attention, but his explorations into the nature of reality are not evidence of a desire to reform the technique of the drama: they are simply an expression of his preoccupation with psychology. The brothers Capek, whose *The Insect Play* was an elaborate allegory of post-War Europe, did not with this or their other plays invent new methods, but worked fruitfully in methods already in use, while other playwrights—Jean Cocteau,

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C K Munro, the Connolly-Kaufman combination, Philip Barry, Bert Brecht, Walther Hasenclever, and Jean Giono among them—have demonstrated that the well-made conventionally constructed play is not the be-all and end-all of drama. The theatre is not likely to die of inanition

## CHAPTER IX

### PROPHETS AND PROPHECIES

#### "The Dynasts"

THE most remarkable play of the present century, and in many ways the most impressive, is one that was never intended for presentation on the stage of a theatre. It is in three parts, nineteen acts, and 130 scenes, and fills a closely-printed book of 525 pages. I refer to Thomas Hardy's epic-drama (at first called "drama" only) of the war with Napoleon, *The Dynasts*. It was completed in 1907 and published in its entirety in 1910. In 1915—at a time when the Great War was spreading a blight on the London theatre—Mr Granville-Barker, to the amazement of all, decided to attempt what had seemed the impossible task of producing at least a part of this great work. He chose some of the more representative scenes and some of the finest of the choruses and welded them into a unity, Hardy wrote a special prologue; and thus in one of London's smallest theatres—the Kingsway—was given not only the most dignified of all British wartime productions (Shakespeare apart) but probably one of the most significant productions of our time.

One speaks of influences and tries to trace them. I have done so unblushingly in this book and am not repentant. But perhaps, except in cases of feeble imitation, it would be more accurate to point to tendencies which have their origin in a common source, rather than to assume that one author or one work has influenced another. However this be, and perhaps because I was concerned as a very humble helper in the Granville-Barker production, I find it difficult to remove from my mind the thought—or, perhaps it would be truer to say, the impression—that Hardy's *The Dynasts* has been one of the major factors in shaping the course of



the drama in England during the past twenty years. The loosening-up of dramatic technique, amounting in many instances to the breaking-down of theatrical dogmas which had persisted for decades, was implicit in Hardy's work, and this is none the less significant because he never intended it for the stage. I say "never intended," but perhaps in the preface to the 1903 edition there is a hint of some such intention even from the beginning. He writes—

Readers will readily discern, too, that *The Dynasts* is intended simply for mental performance, and not for the stage.

But in a later paragraph we have this hint of other desires—

Whether mental performance alone may not eventually be the fate of all drama other than that of contemporary or frivolous life, is a kindred question not without interest. The mind naturally flies to the triumphs of the Hellenic and Elizabethan theatre in exhibiting scenes laid "far in the Unapparent," and asks why they should not be repeated. But the meditative world is older, more invidious, more nervous, more quizzical, than it once was, and, being unhappily perplexed by—

Riddles of Death Thebes never knew,  
may be less ready and less able than Hellas and old England  
were to look through the insistent, and often grotesque,  
substance at the thing signified.

When he wrote this Hardy may have had some premonition of changing forces in the theatre, may even, indeed, have set them in motion, for the modern theatre has discovered means in plenty of projecting across the footlights—to say nothing of abandoning footlights themselves in the process—works as other-worldly as *The Dynasts*. And the paragraph which concludes the preface discloses an awareness of the theatre's needs which is truly prophetic—

In respect of such plays of poesy and dream a practicable compromise may conceivably result, taking the shape of a monotonic delivery of speeches, with dreamy conventional gestures, something in the manner traditionally maintained by the old Christmas mummers, the curiously hypnotizing

impressiveness of whose automatic style—that of persons who spoke by no will of their own—may be remembered by all who ever experienced it. Gauzes or screens to blur outlines might still further shut off the actual, as has, indeed, already been done in exceptional cases.

I have little doubt that some day *The Dynasts* will be produced in its entirety, the performance spread over a week. It would offer no difficulties to the imaginative producer with material resources at his disposal. Aided by the innumerable mechanical devices now available—revolving and sliding stages, the talking-screen, radio, projecting lanterns, and so forth—Hardy's vast conception could undoubtedly be made manifest. The Phantom Intelligences—the Pities, the Years, the Rumours, the Spirits Sinister and Ironic, The Shade of the Earth, Recording Angels, and other insubstantial beings—would tax the capacity of the producer, but (on the assumption that he had an urgent desire to produce the play) could not but stimulate him to imaginative effort, while the pageantry and drama of the historical scenes could not but combine to produce a magnificent spectacle. Goethe's *Faust*, which is presented with unceasing regularity on the German stage, offers few of the theatrical opportunities of *The Dynasts*, which not only contains some of the most vital poetry in our language—rugged, individual, dynamic, and eloquent—but, unlike the German masterpiece, is full of scenes of dramatic power in which great historical figures display themselves revealingly, contrasted with small domestic scenes in which humbler folk wittingly or unwittingly express themselves and show up their so-called betters.

If the day ever dawns when Great Britain, becoming aware that the theatre is as important to its spiritual health as the British Museum, the National Gallery, and the Church, creates a National Theatre worthy of its traditions and responsibilities, Thomas Hardy's epic-drama, *The Dynasts*, should find a prominent place in its permanent repertory. In the meantime, some of the imaginative

stirrings which went to its creation seem to have manifested themselves in many other quarters. During the thirty years that have supervened since *The Dynasts* was written there have been many experiments in drama, and some of them have been alluded to in the preceding chapter. Others I have left for this chapter, because they seem to belong to an impulse, a force, that is actually in motion. What Eugene O'Neill will do in the future nobody could safely prophesy, beyond asserting that he is unlikely to return to the straight, well-made play. It is of course possible that the other innovators referred to will break new ground, but what is more likely is that they will continue to work at the vein they discovered, developing but not abandoning their theories.

### **"Murder in the Cathedral"**

A new-comer, who entered the theatre trailing clouds of highbrow glory, is Mr T S Eliot. He came with the prestige of one who had held a unique position in the world of literature. His influence had been prodigious, but was said to be waning. His allusory *The Waste Land*, as famous for its obscurity as for its undeniable power, marked an epoch in poetry. Apologists, unlike the author himself, explained it, disciples imitated it, at least to the point of writing poems equally obscure. There can be no doubt that *The Waste Land* reveals elements which foreshadow the dramatist—

"Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak

"What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?"

"I never know what you are thinking. Think."

I think we are in rats' alley

Where the dead men lost their bones

"What is that noise?"

The wind under the door

"What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?"

Nothing again nothing

"Do

"You know nothing. Do you see nothing? Do you remember

"Nothing?"

Whether this is poetry or not is not a point we need decide here—it is certainly drama. The fact that these lines contain allusions to matters unrevealed by the text may have value for the reader acquainted with the nature and purpose of the allusions—as drama, heard and not read, the emotional value of the allusions would elude all but the most erudite. But it was not surprising that one whose medium of expression took on so dramatic a cast should some day turn to the theatre. The “Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama” entitled *Sweeney Agonistes*, although produced and applauded by the elect, yielded little satisfaction to those not in the secret. It was not until he wrote *Murder in the Cathedral* that Mr. Eliot made a legitimate entry into the theatre, and then his entry was right royal. He generously acknowledged the help of several producers and critics, but it is unlikely that their help took the form of illuminating obscurities and it is therefore probably safe to assume that Mr. Eliot, when he decided to write for the theatre, realized that obscurity, allusiveness, and veiled erudition would be out of place. *Murder in the Cathedral* is the fruit of erudition, but it does not exact erudition from the audience. It is self-sufficient, as all good plays should be. The reason why it seemed to flash with the unexpectedness of lightning across the London theatrical heavens is due less to its own intrinsic originality than to the sad truth that the London theatre is rarely the home of venturing spirits—its masters play, as a rule, for safety. To those acquainted with the currents of the theatrical stream in other countries and as revealed by many plays printed but not produced, *Murder in the Cathedral* did not appear on the horizon unheralded, like the “Santa Maria” to the natives of the Bahama Islands.

One critic claims that Mr. Eliot has “reanimated a literary form which in England has been dead or dormant for nearly three hundred years.” What literary form was in this critic’s mind—a form which presumably had strength and significance in the first half of the seventeenth century—I do not know, *Murder in the Cathedral* could, I imagine,

claim little kinship with the comedies of the Restoration, more, certainly, with the plays of half a century earlier, such as Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, with its booming chorus, interspersed Latin quotations, and Seven Deadly Sins, more still, perhaps with the Medieval Moralities and Miracle Plays. But to none of these has Mr Eliot's play any but a superficial resemblance. It is essentially of our own time, and the mixture of styles—not always congruously united—is typical of the age. One of the most effective of these elements is the informing Chorus, which narrates what has happened, or what is happening, in heavily-charged free verse. Mr Eliot's use of the Chorus is not conspicuously different from the ancient usage, but his language is the language of our time used by a master. The only element lacking is sensuous colour, which would perhaps have been alien to the poet's theme. The almost infinite variety of modulation enables the poet to express the many changing moods of the play by means of sounds alone, almost as in music. With the words themselves it would be permissible to quarrel, but it would be difficult to justify one's objection to them on the score of the sounds they make. The Chorus of foreboding which precedes the murder of Becket contains lines which, for their sense, some might wish away; but none could deny their power to create the atmosphere essential to the scene—

I have smelt them, the death-bringers, senses are quickened  
By subtle forebodings, I have heard  
Fluting in the night-time, fluting and owls, have seen at noon  
Scaly wings slanting over, huge and ridiculous. I have tasted  
The savour of putrid flesh in the spoon. I have felt  
The heaving of earth at nightfall, restless, absurd. I have heard  
Laughter in the noises of beasts that make strange noises  
jackal, jackass, jackdaw, the scurrying noise of mouse and  
jerboa, the laugh of the loon, the lunatic bird. I have seen  
Grey necks twisting, rat tails twining, in the thick light of  
dawn. I have eaten  
Smooth creatures still living, with the strong salt taste of living  
things under sea.

This Chorus, of which the above quotation is less than a third, accumulates horror as it progresses and its effect on an audience sensitive to sounds as well as sense is overwhelming. It may be reasonably objected that the language employed is over-charged with emotion, that it verges on hysteria, that is, indeed, my own opinion. But it could not be said that it is undramatic.

A Chorus which narrates without emotion has a legitimate place in classic drama and in drama based on the classic models, Mr Eliot's choruses in *Murder in the Cathedral* are never simple narrative, but are always an expression of emotion wrought to the highest pitch of intensity. Thus, as Thomas Becket is murdered, the Chorus declaims—

Clear the air! clean the sky! wash the wind! take stone  
from stone and wash them

The land is foul, the water is foul, our beasts and ourselves  
defiled with blood.

A rain of blood has blinded my eyes Where is England?  
where is Kent? where is Canterbury?

O far far far far in the past, and I wander in a land of barren  
boughs. if I break them, they bleed, I wander in a land of  
dry stones if I touch them they bleed

Although Thomas Becket may be said to be the chief character in *Murder in the Cathedral*, it is the Chorus that plays the most prominent part. The effect of the work is immeasurably heightened by the unabated emotional force of the chorus. When—following the example of Mr Shaw in the Epilogue to *Saint Joan*—Mr Eliot introduces a similarly anachronistic scene, the dramatic temperature drops almost to zero. The immediate unprepared descent from the exalted hysteria of—

Clear the air! clean the sky! wash the wind! take the stone  
from the stone, take the skin from the arm, take the muscle  
from the bone, and wash them Wash the stone, wash the  
bone, wash the brain, wash the soul, wash them wash them!

intoned with all the emotional emphasis which finely trained voices can give them, to this—

FIRST KNIGHT We beg you to give us your attention for a few moments We know that you may be disposed to judge unfavourably of our action You are Englishmen, and therefore believe in fair play and when you see one man being set upon by four, then your sympathies are all with the under dog

is a descent steeper than the dramatist has the right to impose on an audience Mr Shaw, in *Saint Joan*, drops the curtain after the tragedy has culminated in the burning of the Maid, when he raises it for the Epilogue, it is at least on a scene rich in theatrical effectiveness, and the anachronisms in the dialogue are no more serious than one expects from Mr Shaw Moreover, although the emotional intensity of a play about Saint Joan can scarcely ever exceed the feelings produced by the scene in which she is committed to the flames, Mr Shaw does not make the mistake of adding an Epilogue devoid of emotion If it is a let-down, it is a comparatively gentle let-down But the prose discussion between Mr Eliot's four Knights, undramatic and wordy though not without humour, however much it adds to our knowledge of history, almost obliterates the sensation that we have been present at a work of dramatic art Disaster is only just prevented by the reintroduction of poetry with the *Te Deum* which closes the play

The popular success of *Murder in the Cathedral* has shown that a play written for the most part in verse, with a serious theme, is not necessarily doomed to remain in the author's cupboard The fact that it is a religious play and drew largely on a public interested more in religion than in the theatre does not detract from its significance, but may be indeed a sign that people primarily interested in ideas and principles will support a serious theatre if given a chance

### **Drama and Poetry**

The tendency of which Mr Eliot's play is the most successful example in England had a forerunner in France Paul Claudel's play, *L'Annonce Faite à Marie Mystère en*

*quatre actes et un prologue*, published before the Great War, has many points in common with it. There is the same mixture of ancient and modern, the interspersed Latin quotations, and even a sermon, while the nature of the verse is by no means dissimilar. As it is not profitable to compare English verse with French verse, I quote from Louise Morgan Sill's translation entitled *The Tidings Brought to Mary*—

PIERRE DE CRAON Blessed be God who has made me a father  
of churches,

And who has endowed my soul with understanding and the  
sense of the three dimensions<sup>1</sup>

And who has debarred me as a leper and freed me from all  
temporal care,

To the end that I should raise up from the soil of France

Ten Wise Virgins whose oil is never exhausted, and who  
compose a vessel of prayers<sup>1</sup>

What is the *soul*, or bolt of wood, that the lute-maker inserts  
between the front and the back of his instrument,

Compared to this great enclosed lyre, and of those columnar  
Powers in the night, whose number and distance I have  
calculated<sup>2</sup>

Never from the outside do I carve an image

But like Father Noah, from the middle of my enormous  
arch,

I work from within, and see everything rise simultaneously  
around me<sup>1</sup>

“How faithful is stone, and how well it preserves the idea,  
and what shadows it makes<sup>1</sup>

And if a vine grows well on the least bit of wall, and the  
rosebush above it blows,

How beautiful it is, and how true!”—(*The Tidings Brought  
to Mary*)

We praise Thee, O God, for Thy glory displayed in all the  
creatures of the earth,

In the snow, in the rain, in the wind, in the storm, in all of  
Thy creatures, both the hunters and the hunted

They affirm Thee in living, all things affirm Thee in living,  
the bird in the air, both the hawk and the finch, the beast



on the earth, both the wolf and the lamb, the worm in the soil and the worm in the belly—(*Murder in the Cathedral*)

In comparison with *Murder in the Cathedral*, *L'Annonce Faite à Marie* might almost pass for a well-made play. It has far more structure, in the conventional sense, than the English play, which, but for its prose epilogue, might be justly described as a dramatic poem.

Indeed, there is less and less reason why dramatic poems, or any other form of poetic expression capable of embodiment on a platform, should not succeed in the theatre. Tennyson's *Becket*, which deals with the same subject as *Murder in the Cathedral*, and is shaped in the approved dramatic way, is not so likely to be revived as Browning's *Pippa Passes*, which the author probably did not intend for the stage at all. The revival in verse-speaking, and the training of a public willing to listen to poetry, or at any rate to good dramatic English, will inevitably affect the technique of playwriting. As long ago as 1926 I saw a play at the Volksbühne in Berlin which the author called "a scenic ballad." This was *Das Trunkene Schiff*, by Paul Zech. As the title hints, the play dealt with that astonishing young genius Arthur Rimbaud, and Verlaine, and, when poets are the chief characters in a play, it is excusable to put language into their mouths that would not disgrace them. The play was in sixteen scenes, which the author called "stations" (the allusion being presumably to the twelve Stations of the Cross and Verlaine's *Via Dolorosa*), and every device then available in the German theatre was brought to the aid of the production, by Erwin Piscator, at the Volksbühne. "Illustrations" were provided by the famous cartoonist George Grosz and projected on to screens by means of a lantern. The music was by Wolfgang Zeller. For a harrowing scene in which the protagonist is storm-tossed the cinema was brought into service. There were certain affectations in the production, but, in spite of the multiplicity of elements, the general effect was not chaotic. At any rate it remains

vividly in my mind, and of how many plays could one say that, a dozen years later?

Bert Brecht (who turned our *Beggar's Opera* into a German *Drei Groschen Oper*, which had only a nightmarish connexion with the original) has lately devised "choral" plays in which massed choirs have taken a prominent part. In many parts of the world this disintegrating yet creative movement is taking place. Monsieur Claudel, in his pre-War *L'Annonce Faite à Marie*, had shown himself very little concerned with the well-made play, and with his much later lyrical drama, *Christophe Colomb*, he left such conventions completely behind him. Prose, free verse, Latin ritual, screens and revolving stages, music, voices, a reader, choruses, and pageantry—all went to the making of the attempt to put the great discoverer vividly on the stage.

### André Obey

When the Compagnie des Quinze came to London in 1931 they brought with them a number of plays—most of them by Monsieur André Obey—which revealed an endeavour on the part of the poetic muse to break down the resistances of the commercial theatre. The plays were not all written in verse, indeed few were. Even *Le Viol de Lucrèce*, which is based on Shakespeare's poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*, is written for the most part in prose; but the atmosphere which it creates is poetic, and although it is not, line by line, in verse, the work is so rhythmically constructed that the listener reacts to it as if it were in verse. This play does not nominally employ a Chorus, but the *Récitant* and the *Récitante* (masked) fulfil much the same function as the Chorus in Mr Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, adding not only excitement to the action as seen on the stage, but an abundance of humorous commentary also. In another play, *La Bataille de la Marne*, M. Obey employed concerted verse-speaking much more lavishly (and indicated the approach of the German Army by a Bach Chorale played off-stage<sup>1</sup>). His most popular play, *Noé*, although music

does not come into it at all, almost demands a ballet or opera technique for its performance "Straight" prose scarcely has a place in this engaging work, but there is less verse than in the other plays mentioned. It contains no fine writing, the author decided to treat Noah and his family as if they had much in common with the simple French lower middle-class. The language they employ is not very dissimilar from that which Monsieur and Madame Durant would have used in parallel circumstances, but it is chosen to secure the dramatic effect which the author needs. Nobody who saw *Noé* will forget the scene, which might have been merely humorous, but was both humorous and profoundly moving, in which Noah, in his trouble and doubt, turns to the animals for comfort, knowing that they at least, unlike his refractory children, will not answer back—

And then, there's something else but that, well,  
between ourselves (*He looks round to make sure that they  
are alone and then continues in a low voice*) The good God is no  
longer with us. Hush! That's the fact (*The animals,  
lying on the ground, nod their heads*) Put yourselves in His place!  
Just try to put yourselves respectfully in His place! Always,  
always, having His very existence called in question!  
And at those very moments when it is most obvious! Formerly,  
it was men, and now it's the children! All the time  
asking Him for proofs, for miracles How can I give  
guarantees? If Thou exist, turn this egg into an ox!  
If Thou exist, take away my toothache! If Thou hadst existed  
Thou wouldst not have let me bang my head as I came up the  
hatchway "Yes, my friends, one of the girls actually  
dared to say *that* the other day!

So, you understand, He is taking a holiday. Yes, and when  
you come to think of it, I think it's remarkable that He didn't  
take one sooner. What patience He's had! Well, He's come  
to an end of it, that's all. One can't really blame Him. He's  
not a saint, after all, poor fellow!

(Trans H O)

But if the plays of M. Obey have little in common with the  
well-made play, they have if possible less in common with

the "expressionist" school The expressionists are practically indifferent to characterization M Obey has richly endowed all his personages, whether Lucrèce, Noah, or "Le Récitant," with humanity, and even the beasts of the field are allowed their personal idiosyncrasies Abstract ideas play very little part in *Noé* The characters are themselves, quite simply One cares for them as human beings, and, for all the formalism of the method which M Obey employs, it is like human beings that they behave

If the scene in which Noah confides in the beasts, a scene which closes in a mood of great tranquillity, could be compared with the slow movement of a symphony (and the comparison would not be very perverse), the scene that follows, showing how the first sign of God's clemency was conveyed, is a brilliant scherzo, full of humour, with periods of pathos, leading to a dazzling climax The arrival of the dove, the discovery of the leaf—three little leaves, "a little green tree"—in its beak, the discovery that it is an olive-branch—the branch of a comparatively low tree, the realization that the waters are sinking and that the trees are emerging above the surface—these things are worked up brilliantly—

NOAH The trees have come out of the water

CHORUS (*crescendo*) Hoooo! Hoooo! Hoooo!

HAM (*as if he has hardly understood*) Come out of the water?

SHEM and JAPHET (*slowly*) Out—of—the—water

DAUGHTERS (*quickly*) Out of the water!

CHORUS (*very loudly*) Out of the water! (*They start to make violent movements*)

Ah! Oh! . Out—of—the—water! (*Accelerando*)

Out of the water (*Running to the hatch*)

Out of the water! Out of the water!

(*They disappear, shouting A short pause*)

A moment for taking breath is here introduced Noah is aware that his real troubles are now about to begin the world is going to start afresh None of this appears explicitly in the text, but is implied, making Noah the one solemn note in a whirlwind of gaiety The Chorus comes back,

decked out in finery, dancing, whirling about, mad with joy—

CHOIR Out!

Out!

Out!

Out!

SONS Out of the water!

DAUGHTERS Out of the water!

EVERYBODY The water! The water!

Out! Out!

Out! Out of the water!

NOAH (*supporting his swooning WIFE against his breast*) Oh, you bunglers! Bunglers of everything!

Absolute bunglers! Wasters of years! Wasters of minutes!

Bunglers! Bunglers!

CHORUS (*dancing*) Out!

Out!

Out!

Out!

Out of the water!

NOAH We are interferers with gaiety! Interferers with youth!

Interferers with happiness!

CHORUS We are!

We are!

We are out of the water!

NOAH Lord! Lord! Old pal! We're done for! Oh,

we're done for! Leave us to stew in our own juice! And

don't let us hear any more about it!

CHORUS (*deliriously*) Out of the water!

Out of the water!

Out of the water!

(Trans H O)

I have said that M. Obey's work owes little or nothing to the expressionists, except, perhaps, in so far as every dramatist now working in a freer medium is in the debt of the pioneers who cleared away the dead wood. In one respect, particularly does he differ from his Teutonic brethren. His work is full of humour and wit theirs has very little, and, in many plays, none. This may be due to the atmosphere

in which they first began to work—the grey period of disillusionment which followed the Great War—or it may be attributable to a racial lack. The nightmare texture of Toller's early and perhaps most significant work, *Masse Mensch*, for example, may well owe its peculiar character to the fact that it was written in prison. He has put it on record that the play burst from him in a rush and was committed to paper in less than three days. He wrote to the producer in 1921—

The two nights, which, owing to my imprisonment, I was forced to spend in "bed" in a dark cell, were abysses of torment. My mind was tortured with visions of faces, daemonic faces, faces tumbling over each other in grotesque somersaults. In the mornings, shivering with fever, I sat down to write and did not stop until my fingers, clammy and trembling, refused to serve me.

A play delivered to the world in such abnormal conditions is likely to bear marks of its difficult birth, and *Masse Mensch*, for all its vitality and poignancy, its lyrical power and flaming conviction, is unhealthily humourless and therefore unbalanced.

### The Younger Venturers

Of all the German expressionists it is Toller who has most impressed himself upon English and Irish playwrights. Whether they are aware of the influence or not, the points of resemblance between their work and his are fairly clearly discernible. Mr Denis Johnston declares with some acerbity in the case of one of his plays that it is not expressionist or constructivist drama and is not usually improved by such methods of presentation, and doubtless he is right, but it would be even more foolish to produce the play realistically. Playwrights are fortunately beginning to realize that their work is not complete when they have finished the text of a play. If they are not willing to hand it over to a producer without reservations, it is their duty to lay down laws and give explicit stage directions. Mr Johnston shows,

by the stage directions in *The Old Lady Says* "No," that he is aware of this—

BLIND MAN (*mounts upon a chair*) The shadows are gathering, gathering They must dance at a wake An' I playin' for them on the fiddle Are yez ready all? (*He tunes up The lights in front have dimmed, leaving a great sheet of brightness flooding from the sides upon the back-cloth The walls of the room seem to fade apart while the crowd draws aside and seats itself upon the floor and the dresser, and the piano and upon all sides of the room The Speaker has vanished*)

VOICES OF THE CROWD The shadows are gathering he says they must dance at a wake Seats for the shadows the gathering shadows the shadows that dance at a wake (*The Blind Man commences to fiddle a jig in the whole-tone scale*)  
(*Upon the back-cloth two great shadows appear gesturing and posturing in time with the music*)

This scene recalls vividly the Berlin production of *Masse Mensch*, the fourth scene of which—a "dream picture"—is a prison courtyard by night All is in gloom, save for a lantern in the middle of the stage The "hero" of the play, The Nameless, has appeared noiselessly among the sentries and, begins to play an accordion, and around him sway in a grotesque dance the sentries, also men condemned to death, with ropes round their necks, and loose women, casting great shadows on the surrounding scenery

Mr Johnston, in common with most Irish authors, has inherited the gift of words They pour from his pen in a copious rhythmic flow, rich in allusiveness and emotional stress, full of colour and sensuous charm. This very gift is a danger His purpose is rarely as clear as it ought to be, and although his emotional responses are invariably sound and his dramatic instinct sure, one is aware of an insufficiency of fundamental brain-work The plays are seldom self-contained, they are apt to exact from an audience knowledge—of Irish political movements and the like—which they may not possess, nor need to possess An author

has no justification for complaint if, by mystifying an audience, he fails to secure its co-operation. A performance of *Hamlet* does not leave us wishing that we were more familiar with Danish politics, we have been told quite enough to make the play self-sufficient. A performance of *The Old Lady Says "No,"* on the other hand, leaves the mind tormented with loose ends. The author has disclosed enough to convince us that Emmet, the hero, was an interesting man, but not enough to put him firmly and convincingly on his own feet.

Of Mr. Johnston's talent there can be little doubt, nor can it be doubted that he has an individual outlook and the capacity to express it in an individual way. It is true that, like Mr. T. S. Eliot and many of his contemporaries among the poets, he sometimes helps himself discreetly to the words of other writers, incorporating them in the texture of his own work, but the practice cannot be attributed to a lack of felicitous language of his own, nor even perhaps to a sensitive appreciation of other authors', but rather to a belief in a technique of allusiveness which *The Waste Land* has made fashionable. Perhaps it will be claimed that the technique is not very new and that Shakespeare's practice of turning sows' ears into silk purses is comparable.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Johnston is a poet, one feels that he might break into verse at any moment, and indeed often his prose is verse—

If I could love without sight or sound, without the miracles of touch and sense, then I would be mightier than Death and I could die in happiness. But when that studded door clangs to behind me, how shall I love her then when once my body is no more, when eyes no longer see, nor fingers feel? What shall I do if when she comes at last, my prison is an unreprieving grave?

This might have been written in irregular—and not very irregular—verse-form, and no actor sensitive to the sounds and rhythm of language, would speak it as prose. *A Bride for a Unicorn*, from which this passage is quoted, is probably the most considerable play that Mr. Johnston has yet



written It has more of the virtues of the previous plays, and some of their vices. Clearness of intention is not among the former. It is conceived in a form that recalls Strindberg's "Dream" plays, but it has not their conciseness of statement, nor does it convince one, as Strindberg even at his most strange did, that the author is fully aware of his own aim. My impression is that Mr Johnston is the possessor of a magnificent instrument which he has not yet entirely mastered One feels, at any rate, that he is a man of the theatre, that the theatre is his rightful medium and not one chosen among many that were equally attractive

It is a pity that the recent growth of the English drama has not been similarly from within We have seen that most successful young English dramatists in the period which followed the Great War were content to keep to the accustomed paths dramatists of the immediately preceding generation were more venturesome than they Shaw and Galsworthy reflected changing ideas in technique, but John van Druten, St John Ervine, R C Sherriff, and their contemporaries remained true to their beginnings The changes which are beginning to disturb the surface of the English theatre are due, then, not to the established dramatists themselves, but to new-comers from without Mr. T S Eliot's spiritual birth took place not in a theatre, but in a study *Murder in the Cathedral* was an accident; a splendid fluke Considered from a theatrical viewpoint, the play, even after it had been doctored by men of the theatre, showed no real gift for dramatic construction, though it revealed a keen sense of dramatic expression The young poets whom Mr Eliot heralded are now entering the theatre, partly because they are propagandists to a man and, like Mr Shaw, appreciate the immense value of the theatre as an instrument for spreading ideas Their work up to the present has been tentative and, in its technique, derived They started with several advantages convictions, a natural facility in the use of words, a following among their own generation, an indulgent Press, and a Time Spirit

favourable to their peculiar form of iconoclasm. The most prominent among them are Messrs W H Auden and Christopher Isherwood, who have lately worked in collaboration, and, although even their best work is pervaded by an inescapable flavour of amateurishness, the progress made by them in a comparatively short time augurs well for their future. It is a far cry from the undergraduate humour and half-baked political dogmatism of Mr Auden's first play, *The Dance of Death* (perhaps it is not altogether without significance, as indicating an absence of healthy humility, that he should have chosen a title already associated with two masterpieces—Strindberg's and Holbein's) to the incomparably more mature *The Ascent of F 6*, in which he collaborated with Mr Isherwood.

The free-and-easy technique of *The Dance of Death* was used, with variations, in the first joint work of the collaborators, *The Dog Beneath the Skin*—an elaborate charade-like play in which the authors' high spirits abounded to such good purpose that criticism was held at bay during the performance, the curtain down, criticism of what had possessed all the spontaneity of improvisation would have seemed churlish.

But *The Dog Beneath the Skin* was not an improvisation; it was work produced and published for the public pleasure, and the apparently haphazard construction and mixture of styles were presumably intentional. Revue jungles, pantomime couplets, serious poetry, and plain prose—all had their part, but were not welded into a whole that convinced. The *navet  * bore an air of disingenuousness, and much of the poetry had no dramatic qualities at all. There seemed no discoverable reason, of a satirical or other order, for opening a serious play with a piece of musical-comedy exposition—

VICAR Here am I, the Vicar good  
Of Pressan Ambo, it's understood  
Within this parish border  
I labour to expound the truth

To train the tender plant of youth  
 And guard the moral order  
 CHORUS With troupes of scouts for village louts  
 And preaching zest he does his best  
 To guard the moral order

This sort of thing, reminiscent of such pantomime clichés  
 as—

SQUIRE To-morrow is my wedding-day,  
 A hundred pounds I'll give away (*Yokels' hilarity*)  
 But after all I think it best  
 To lock it in the old oak chest (*Yokels' dismay*)

has a humble place in school entertainments, but is neither witty enough nor pointed enough for adult consumption. It mixes indigestibly with the more serious satire and not at all with the real poetry which adorns the play. Our authors went into the theatre lightheartedly, bringing many gifts, but not the gift of self-criticism. With their political and social objects we are not here concerned, but, as ends are best served by efficient means, it is obvious that Messrs Auden and Isherwood would have done their cause greater service if they had made their aims clearer and had been less casual in their methods. If you are going to use a revue technique in order to attack the order of society represented by the average revue, your work must be at least as slick as the average revue, and *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, when aping the revue, was less amusing than the average good revue which it aped. With the flagellating intentions behind the lyric, "You're in the racket, too," most honest citizens would agree, but a Noel Coward or an A. P. Herbert would have given us something smarter and more to the point than the poem of which the following chorus is a specimen, without its irrelevancies—

If the postman is three minutes late,  
 If the grocer's boy scratches your gate,  
 If you get the wrong number,  
 If the cook has burnt the stew,

If all your rock-plants  
 Come up as dock-plants  
 And your tennis-court turns blue  
 The reason is just simply this;  
 You're in the racket, too !

Mr Coward's *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*, for instance, is just as slick in expression, more pungent in its satire and better-humoured, as well as much more effective theatrically

With *The Ascent of F 6*, Messrs Auden and Isherwood's work for the theatre came of age. Although lacking in an over-all conception, it has so much force, so much verbal felicity, so much humanity, that its technical imperfections are relatively unimportant. Skill in the use of words is a danger which they have not yet overcome. Their characters frequently express themselves in words which belie their own constitution. *The Ascent of F 6* is not realistic and cannot be judged by the canons that would apply to works in the naturalistic school, but, for a considerable part of the action, the men engaged in the ascent of the mountain known as F 6 behave realistically and speak realistically, and dramatic consistency demands that any departure from this practice should be theatrically justified and prepared for. Much of the emotional power of the work derives from the psychological truth displayed by the characters in their reactions upon one another. The language used by the men during the ascent is as nearly realistic as it would be in a straight play by Galsworthy—indeed there are moments which remind one of the jungle episodes in Galsworthy's *The Forest*. It jars, therefore, and breaks the illusion when the chief character breaks into a soliloquy—

RANSOM (*to skull*) Well, Master the novices are here. Have your dry bones no rustle of advice to give them? Or are you done with climbing?

Another flaw is the juxtaposition of realistic dialogue cheek by jowl with dialogue that is not poetry, nor stylized prose, but plain prose expressing sentiments which the characters

might think but would certainly not express Ransom, for instance, to his brother—

How often, when we were boys, you used to come to me as you come to-day, with that peculiar smile on your face, half impudent, half timid! What do you want this time—my toy engine, my cricket bat, my rare West Indian stamp? Or shall I do you a favour—run that errand to the butcher's, correct your Latin verses, clean the motor-bicycle? Let's hear what it is, James we're grown men now

Such inconsistencies defeat the authors' own ends That Ransom's mind would contain some such thought as here expressed is no doubt true, but, unless one adopts a technique like O'Neill's in *Strange Interlude*, such truths must be left unexpressed, or conveyed in some other way Their expression, by taxing the hearer's credulity, sets up a resistance in his mind which is inimical to the required receptivity

A similar inconsistency is shown in the interludes spoken by Mr A and Mrs A, who may be taken as standing for quintessential suburbia. In rhyming verse they comment with bitter amusement on the narrowness of their lives, and on passing events, revealing the relation of the man-in-the-street to the theme of the play Their language, although in verse, corresponds as a rule to the sort of language which people in such circumstances would be likely to use—

MRS A Give me some money before you go  
There are a number of bills we owe  
And you can go to the bank to-day  
During the lunch-hour

MR A I dare say,  
But, as it happens, I'm overdrawn

MRS A Overdrawn? What on earth have you done  
With all the money? Where's it gone?

MR A How does money always go?  
Papers, lunches, tube-fares, teas,  
Tooth-paste, stamps and doctor's fees,  
Our trip to Hove cost a bit you know.

But neither Mr. Auden nor Mr. Isherwood can be confined within the limits of their own creation. This flat and colourless language, admirably as it expresses what they wish to express, does not satisfy them. When some keen emotion has to be shown by Mr. A or Mrs. A they throw off the shackles which they have rightly imposed upon themselves, and break into language which is entirely out of character, thereby destroying their own creation. Mrs. A, hearing the radio announcement of the death of the scientist, Edward Lamp, forgets her upbringing completely and holds forth in pure Audenese—

Death like his is right and splendid,  
That is how life should be ended !  
He cannot calculate nor dread  
The mortifying in the bed,  
Powers wasting day by day  
While the courage ebbs away  
Ever-charming, he will miss  
The insulting paralysis,  
Ruined intellect's confusion,  
Ulcer's patient persecution,  
Sciatica's intolerance  
And the cancer's sly advance,  
Never hear, among the dead,  
The rival's brilliant paper read,  
Colleague's deprecating cough  
And the praises falling off;  
Never know how in the best  
Passion loses interest,  
Beauty sliding from the bone  
Leaves the rigid skeleton

If Messrs. Auden and Isherwood continue to work in the theatre they will doubtless develop a keener faculty of self-criticism, and that ruthlessness in cutting which the theatre imposes. There is something of the spirit of Ibsen in their work—the Ibsen of *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, and the latest period—and an austerity of purpose which all their facetiousness cannot conceal. Some day, if the theatre is their medium

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by vocation, they will approach it with becoming humility and respect its laws as scrupulously as they respect the laws of poetry. In calling attention to imperfections in the venturesome work of these and other young dramatists, I am far from wishing to examine it with an over-critical eye. My aim is merely to sound a warning against a dilettante attitude towards the theatre. Dabbling pleases nobody but the dabblers, and not them for long.

Many unmentioned names spring into my mind as I close this chapter, the names of playwrights who are doing good work in many styles, using the theatre to express interesting ideas, and employing one of the several forms of play now available to them to shed light on the many facets of life. It is not my task now to appraise new themes, but I hope I have not overlooked the work of any technical pioneer.

## CHAPTER X

### THE ONE-ACTER

THE one-act play has been described as the Cinderella of the theatre, a modest, neglected creature, driven into the kitchen, where she engages in menial tasks while her less comely but more fortunate sisters, the full-length plays, are displayed for the admiration of the town. A not altogether apt description, but not entirely lacking in truth! If it had any justification in the past, it has even more in the present, for the fairy tale has run its traditional course and Cinderella, the one-act play, once despised and neglected, is now received in the highest places, and the Prince Charming of the modern theatre, Mr Noel Coward, has himself espoused her. It must be admitted, however, that Mr. Coward is almost alone in England in believing in the commercial value of his bride. His nine plays—collected in a single volume with the common title *To-night at 8 30*—stand as a witness to the possibility of inducing the theatre-going public to patronize not only a single evening of one-act plays, but three separate evenings many times repeated. There would seem to be no theoretical reason why Mr Coward should remain the only English playwright capable of supplying all the necessary ingredients for a successful evening of one-acters, and perhaps his example may some day be followed. But at the present time it would be unfair to suggest that the commercial theatre waits with open arms for the advent of authors of one-act plays.

At one time the one-acter was used as a stop-gap, before or after the main fare. It had no reason for existence in its own right. It was either a curtain-raiser, whose only merit was that it kept the pit and gallery amused while the late-coming gentry shuffled into their seats, or an after-piece thrown in to make up the three hours or more which theatregoers at one time claimed as their right. These



short plays were not taken very seriously, and it was a rare event if an actor of recognized attainment took part in them. In fact, their function was much the same as that of the earlier acts of a Chinese play, which, as we have seen in a previous chapter, claim no reverence from the audience. In England, one-actors formerly had certain uses apart from those mentioned. they provided opportunities for small-part actors to play modest leads and they enabled budding playwrights to try their prentice hands at something less ambitious than a full-length play. Very few of these pre-1900 one-actors have survived to give us a taste of their quality, but, as their purpose was almost exclusively utilitarian, it may perhaps be safely assumed that they had little to do with art.

With the dropping of the curtain-raiser and the abolition of the after-piece, the one-actor was driven from the commercial theatre, but, so far from suffering on account of this neglect, it has shown an ever-increasing vitality and has now established itself as an art-form with as legitimate a right to recognition in drama as the short story has in literature. It is hardly necessary to say that there are innumerable one-actors with no greater claim to artistic consideration than the majority of short stories contributed to the popular magazines. Written to a formula dictated by public demand, they achieve or fail to achieve their object and reap or fail to reap their reward. In either case they need not detain us here.

With certain rare exceptions it is only in the amateur theatre world that the one-act play now finds an outlet in Great Britain. In some Continental countries the case is different. There are few countries where there is as healthy an amateur movement as that which flourishes in Great Britain, but, on the other hand, there is in some of them more scope for the one-actor in the professional theatre. It is not at all unusual to find a programme of two plays—one short and one long—in the Paris theatre, by authors as distinguished as well as commercially successful as Jules

Romains. The attentions of the amateur societies in this country are, however, sufficiently assiduous to encourage dramatists to devote at least a part of their attention to the short play, and already a vast literature exists.

The range of the one-acter is, for various reasons, considerably greater than that of the full-length play. For example, whereas a play designed to fill an evening must keep approximately to a given length, the one-acter may properly occupy the five minutes meet for a revue sketch or the sixty to eighty minutes necessary to reveal a character as complex as Strindberg's *Miss Julia*. The form of the one-acter, partly because it is short-breathed and therefore makes less strenuous demands than the full-length play on the attention of the audience, is capable of almost infinite variety. It may be neat, compact, and rigid, but it may also be wayward, expansive, and flexible. So long as it does not conflict with the fundamental principles of drama, it may venture in a hundred different directions, and exploit almost as many themes as the ingenuity and inventiveness of the author can suggest. An audience will give its suffrage for half an hour to an experiment which, expanded to two and a half hours, it might find intolerable. Let us recall some of the possible forms of the one-acter.

### **The Straight Play**

In this category may be classed the greater number of short plays whose technique resembles in most respects the technique of the well-made long play. Characterization is much the same in essence, but more speedily built up, atmosphere is generated in much the same way, with, however, less time in which to achieve it, the laws which govern the dialogue of the long play govern the short play with even greater severity, but they are the same laws. It is only in the matter of structure that there is any radical difference.

A one-acter may be many things, but one thing it is not. It is not a long play cut down any more than a short story is a novel cut down. The method of approach is quite

different The mental attitude of the author when embarking on a long play is not unlike that of one setting out on a long journey He knows what his destination will be and would be extremely surprised if he found himself in an unexpected place at the end of his journey, but he is quite prepared for surprises on the way His journey is in some sense a voyage of discovery. The author of a one-act play, however, is like one who gets into a train on a line with which he is familiar, with a short-distance ticket in his hand He knows not only what his destination is but also the names of all the stations *en route* There is no time for surprises he hopes and expects that everything will happen according to plan

Even a fairly long one-acter has no time for the leisurely exposition tolerated in a full-length play It is a question of proportion If the play is to take a quarter of an hour in performance, exposition must occupy no more than a minute or two, even a half-hour play cannot afford to spend more than a few preliminary minutes during which the stage is set for the story about to be unfolded Contact with the audience must be made at once and no time ought to be lost in establishing not only the appropriate atmosphere but even the nature of the theme. How quickly Synge, in that masterpiece *Riders to the Sea*, reveals the burden of the play! The curtain rises on a fisherman's cottage kitchen The audience is allowed to take in the details which reveal the nature of the scene—the nets, the oilskins, the spinning-wheel—and perhaps to feel some curiosity concerning the new planks of wood which stand against the wall A girl enters and asks in a low voice, which is in itself portentous—

Where is she?

and the reply—

She's lying down, God help her, and maybe sleeping if she's able,

adds further to the sense of calamity Another second or

two pass, and then we find that the new-comer has brought with her

a shirt and a plain stocking were got off a drowned man in Donegal

The mind is thus prepared for the piling on of woe and the inevitably tragic climax

*Riders to the Sea* is, like perhaps the majority of one-acters, a story, but the one-act play has rarely time to relate a story in such a way as to show all the incidents in the order in which they happened the method of projection is almost inevitably retrospective, at least in part The play is, in itself, a climax—dramatic tension in a state of dissolution—during which all the antecedent causes are revealed The story thus brought to light is not necessarily an intricate one; but it must be sufficiently complex to make the denouement interesting The plot of *Riders to the Sea* is simplicity itself, it is the story of Maurya and of her six sons, all of whom are given one by one to the sea The gradual revelation of this series of calamities, of which only the last actually takes place during the course of the play, produces an effect of profound tragedy, greater, probably, because more concentrated, than if each successive drowning had been shown to us over the three hours of a full-length play

Synge's masterpiece cannot be taken as a typical example of the straight one-act play, however, because the dialogue, ostensibly naturalistic, is as far removed from realism as poetry is from prose There is a core of tragedy at the heart of all beauty, and the poignancy of *Riders to the Sea* is at least as much due to the beauty of its language as to the touching history it tells. Not every writer of peasant plays can reveal the souls of his characters in cadences like these—

MAURYA (*raising her hand and speaking as if she did not see the people around her*) They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and

the surf is in the west, making a great stir with two noises, and they hitting one on the other I'll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening It isn't that I haven't prayed for you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. It isn't that I haven't said prayers in the dark night till you wouldn't know what I'd be saying, but it's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time, surely It's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain, if it's only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking

If, in this respect, Synge stands alone among those playwrights who use the English language, many other authors of one-acters, probably not uninfluenced by him, have evolved a form of dialogue, a sort of heightened prose, which resembles his William Butler Yeats, in most of his work, achieves an individuality to which only he may lay claim, but in his peasant plays there is an unmistakable echo of Synge which he would be far from disowning Synge and the English Bible between them have left their traces on such passages as—

OLD WOMAN It is hard service they take that help me Many that are red-cheeked now will be pale-cheeked, many that have been free to walk the hills and the bogs and the rushes, will be sent to walk hard streets in far countries, many a good plan will be broken, many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it, many a child will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid

Sometimes my feet are tired and my hands are quiet, but there is no quiet in my heart When people see me quiet, they think old age has come upon me and that all the stir has gone out of me But when the trouble is on me I must be talking to my friends

Put these two extracts from *Cathleen ni Houlihan* beside the pure essential Yeats of *The Countess Cathleen*—

OONA Tell them who walk upon the floor of peace  
That I would die and go to her I love,  
The years like great black oxen tread the world,  
And God the herdsman goads them on behind  
And I am broken by their passing feet

Nobody but Yeats could have written this

There are passages in Mr. J A Ferguson's well-known play, *Campbell of Kilmohr*, which would stand comparison with Synge, for example—

MARY STEWART Och ' be quiet now I would be listening till the last sound of it passes into the great hills and over all the wide world . . . It is fitting for you to be crying, a child that cannot understand, but water shall never wet eye of mine for Dugald Stewart Last night I was but the mother of a lad that herded sheep on the Athole hills, this morn it is that I am the mother of a man who is among the great ones of the earth All over the land they will be telling of Dugald Stewart Mothers will teach their children to be men by him High will his name be with the teller of fine tales . . . The great men came, they came in their pride, terrible like the storm they were, and cunning with the words of guile were they Death was with them

and George Reston Malloch, Gilbert Cannan, Constance Holme, Dorothy Una Ratchiffe, Padraic Pearse, among others, have followed in the tradition. It is a good tradition, but one which has its pitfalls The barrier which separates good poetic prose from the fustian of Wardour Street is exceedingly narrow, and those whose natural medium is straight prose are prone to slip into bad ways when they flirt with poetic prose They are apt to confuse poetic prose with that chancy hybrid, prose poetry Honest prose, approximating to the speech in use by the class depicted, is a sufficiently serviceable instrument, and those who are not drawn by an ungainsayable inner urge to express themselves according to a quasi-poetic formula would be wise

to avoid it. They will have the good companionship of such authors as Harold Brighouse, Stanley Houghton, A. A. Milne, St. John Ervine, A. W. Pinero, Henry Arthur Jones, and many more.

### The Poetic Play

The author of the poetic play, because at the outset he disowns realism by writing in verse, is released from many of the restrictions which bind the realist. Since he is relieved of the necessity of reflecting current speech, further privileges are for this very reason added unto him. Among other things, he is not compelled to attain visual verisimilitude. Mr. Gordon Bottomley may with propriety open his play *King Lear's Wife* with Merryn, waiting-woman to Queen Hygd, praying aloud—

Shield me from rotting cancers and from madness  
Shield me from sudden death, worse than two death-beds,  
Let me not lie like this unwanted queen

what time the queen herself so pilloried is lying asleep in bed. In a realistic play such disregard of the probabilities would not be tolerated. When a moment later King Lear enters abruptly and makes too much noise, Merryn remonstrates with him—

O, Sire, move softly, the Queen sleeps at last,

regardless of the fact that she herself has been praying aloud and committing herself moreover to somewhat tactless sentiments. An audience is not troubled by this inconsistency, however, because it has willingly entered into a conspiracy of unrealism with the author. Although Merryn has prayed aloud for all in the auditorium to hear, the audience is ready to assume that the prayer was either silent or uttered so softly that the sleeping queen would not be disturbed by it. Soliloquies and asides, banished with contumely from the well-made play, are readily accepted with all the other conventions which belong to poetic drama. When, in Mr. Laurence Binyon's one-act tragedy

of that name, CEnone, in pursuit of Paris, finds him vanished, we are not surprised that she should break into audible lamentation—

Alone and dying in this darkness, oh,  
Where have I driven him? Where lies he now,  
Fainting, perhaps, and fallen on the rocks?

We should have been more surprised if she had kept her grief to herself, since one of the glories of poetic drama is its freedom from conventional limitations. Nevertheless, among poets closely acquainted with the theatre whose plays are destined primarily for performance and secondarily to be read—notably, John Drinkwater, W B Yeats, and John Masefield—there has been a tendency to avoid soliloquies and asides and other deviations from the path of realism, but the abandonment of these conventions is probably due to unconscious subservience to modern theatrical usage rather than to any inherent objection to the conventions as such. Drinkwater himself, in his finest one-act play, *X = o*, throws verisimilitude to the winds at the most tense moment of the tragedy, when Pronax, returning to the Greek tent and finding his friend slain, addresses himself to the heavens—

. gods!                      what, friend                      Salvius, Salvius  
Dead                      it is done                      it is done                      There is judgment  
made  
Beauty is broken                      .                      and there on the Trojan wall  
One too shall come                      one too shall come

### The Fantasy

Not far removed from the poetic play is the fantasy, whether written in prose or verse. The fantasy, disregarding the restraints laid upon the imagination of the realist, imposes limits of another order upon the author's muse. His vision may be rangeless, but his play will not be effective unless he restricts its field of action. In some ways fantasy demands a greater discipline than realism. Realism is



provided by life itself with an ever-available touchstone by which it may be checked, fantasy, knowing no laws but its own, with no court of appeal, must convince by its own power of persuasion. The fantasy-writer must select from his abundance only what is relevant and congruous, and, what is more exacting, he must be able to subdue the scepticism of his audience as soon as it shows signs of germinating.

Among the most successful workers in this medium is Lord Dunsany. He has created a world of his own, peopled with characters as indubitably Dunsanian as Galsworthy's characters are indubitably English. All that we have the right to ask of them is that they should be true to their own inborn characteristics, we demand that they should behave like genuine Dunsanians and speak genuine Dunsanese. If, as well as displaying these virtues, they comport themselves in accordance with the laws of drama, their right to an honourable place in the theatre cannot be gainsaid—

*(Three beggars are seated upon the ground)*

ULF There has been a comet come near to the earth of late and the earth has been parched and sultry so that the gods are drowsy and all those things that are divine in man, such as benevolence, drunkenness, extravagance, and song, have faded and died and have not been replenished by the gods.

OOGNO It has indeed been sultry.

THAHN I have seen the comet o' nights.

ULF The gods are drowsy.

OOGNO If they awake not soon and make this city worthy again of our order, I for one shall forsake the calling and buy a shop and sit at ease in the shade and barter for gain.

THAHN. You will keep a shop?—(*The Gods of the Mountain.*)

AGMAR (*who has not eaten*) I have not eaten since the world was very new and the flesh of men was tenderer than now. These younger gods have learned the habit of eating from the lions.

OORONDER O oldest of divinities, partake, partake.

AGMAR It is not fitting that such as I should eat. None eat but beasts and men and the younger gods. The Sun and

the Moon and the nimble Lightning and I, we may kill,  
and we may madden, but we do not eat

AKMOS If he but eat of our offering he cannot overwhelm us  
ALL O ancient deity, partake, partake

AGMAR Enough Let it be enough that these have con-  
descended to this bestial and human habit (*Ibid*)

A world even more remote from the world around us than Dunsany's is that created by Maurice Maeterlinck. In a previous chapter I have had occasion to refer to this non-real domain where shadowy half-human creatures exist in an atmosphere of foreboding. These short puppet-plays of Maeterlinck have little relation to the jolly, highly-coloured and highly-seasoned puppet-plays of Hans Sachs or the various species of Punch and Judy show which have existed from time to time in all parts of Europe, but they are not wanting in a sort of phosphorescent vitality of their own, and the literature of the short play would be considerably the poorer without them. They offer great opportunities to imaginative producers capable of identifying themselves with the Maeterlinckian mind, and, to theatre-goers weary of the life of their own times, an artificial world into which they can escape with the assurance that they will not be pursued, except by their own thoughts.

In his one-act tragedy, *Salomé*, Oscar Wilde, consciously or unconsciously, employed much the same technique as Maeterlinck used in plays like *Pelléas et Mélisande* and in his *Trois Petits Drames pour Marionnettes*. Compare the opening of *Salomé* with the Maeterlinck plays and the kinship will be clear—

YGRAINE Ta première nuit sera mauvaise, Tintagiles. La  
mer hurle déjà autour de nous, et les arbres se plaignent.  
Il est tard. La lune est sur le point de se coucher derrière  
les peupliers qui étouffent le palais. Nous voici seuls,  
peut-être, bien qu'ici. Il faille vivre sur ses gardes. Il semble  
qu'on y guette l'approche du plus petit bonheur.

—(*La Mort de Tintagiles*)

ABLAMORE Je crois que le sommeil regne jour et nuit sous ces

arbres Chaque fois qu'elle y vient avec moi, vers le soir, elle est à peine assise qu'elle s'endort Il faut, hélas ! que je m'en rejouisse Durant le jour, quand je lui parle, et que son regard rencontre, par hasard, mon regard, il est dur comme celui d'un esclave à qui l'on vient d'ordonner une chose impossible —(*Alladine et Palomides*)

PALOMIDES Ils m'ont bandé les yeux, ils m'ont lié les mains  
ALLADINE Ils m'ont lié les mains, ils m'ont bandé les yeux.  
Je crois que mes mains saignent  
—(*Alladine et Palomides*)

LE JEUNE SYRIEN Comme la princesse Salomé est belle ce soir !

LE PAGE D'HERODIAS Regardez la lune La lune a l'air très étrange On dirait une femme qui sort d'un tombeau Elle ressemble à une femme morte On dirait qu'elle cherche des morts

LE JEUNE SYRIEN Elle a l'air très étrange Elle ressemble à une petite princesse qui porte un voile jaune, et a des pieds d'argent Elle ressemble à une princesse qui a des pieds comme des petites colombes blanches On dirait qu'elle danse

LE PAGE D'HÉRODIAS Elle est comme une femme morte Elle va très lentement

LE JEUNE SYRIEN Comme la princesse Salomé est belle ce soir !

LE PAGE D'HÉRODIAS Vous la regardez toujours Vous la regardez trop Il ne faut regarder les gens de cette façon Il peut arriver un malheur —(*Salomé*)

Any play in the Maeterlinck manner is apt to seem like a parody of the master, and even Wilde in *Salomé* barely escaped from the danger of being unconsciously humorous. Wilde's triumph in this case is that, although he used a method similar to Maeterlinck's, he achieved an entirely different effect Maeterlinck's world belongs to Maeterlinck alone *Salomé*, however unhealthy and perverse, belongs unmistakably to our world

Success in fantasy can be achieved only by those whose

minds find natural expression in fantasy; individuality of expression is, above all, essential. Good and successful plays have been written in the manner of masters of the realistic school, there have been Shavian plays which would not have disgraced the master, poetic plays directly traceable to the influence of Shakespeare are innumerable and many of them admirable. But plays written in emulation of Dunsany or of Maeterlinck, plays which exploit the whimsey of Barrie, are almost invariably spineless failures. The tricks and mannerisms may be seized, but the inward conviction which gave life to the original work is lacking in the imitations.

### **The Humorous Play**

The one-act form lends itself particularly well to the humorous subject. A joke, however good, is the better for not being long-drawn-out, and we have it on excellent authority that brevity is the soul of wit. If comedy usually demands the shapeliness of the three-act structure for its happiest expression, many a farce which has been spread over an evening would have been better compressed into half an hour.

Even a cursory examination of the literature available will reveal how little the range of the humorous one-act play is restricted. The humorous one-acter may be nothing but a picture of a certain section of society, pleasurable less for the story it tells than for the pointedness of the observation it displays, or it may be simply a satirical comment—an anecdote designed to call attention to some social anomaly or to foibles which are more effectively ridiculed in an amusing skit than scourged in a polemical tract. Miss Gertrude Jennings has pilloried numerous odd but ever-present social nuisances in a series of somewhat acidulated but always amusing little plays. Mr. H. F. Rubinstein contrived to pack much trenchant criticism of the theatre and of theatre-goers into the five one-acters which he collectively called *What's Wrong with the Drama*.

It is easier for an amateur actor to be funny (consciously as well as unconsciously) than to be serious; moreover, the amateur's public is, generally speaking, readier to laugh at an amateur performance than to be moved by it. These two facts combined have been responsible for a spate of would-be humorous plays many of which are deplorably feeble and an excellently suitable vehicle for the feeble exhibition of facetiousness and horseplay demanded in some quarters. But this is not the fault of the medium, as the work of many famous playwrights testifies. Some of their most amusing plays have been couched in this form by Chekhov, Jules Romans, A. A. Milne, Lord Dunsany, Noel Coward, and others. Barrie gave us some of his most significant work in the form of one-act comedies, including *Shall we Join the Ladies?*, the bitter cynicism of which gave the lie to much of his own sentimental philosophy and almost removed it from the category of humorous plays, in spite of its humour. Galsworthy, who rarely devoted a whole play to a humorous theme, packed much satire, humanity, and philosophy into the humorous one-acter, *The Little Man*. Shaw, who has written plays of all possible lengths—from the Gargantuan *Back to Methuselah* to the Lilliputian *Passion, Poison, and Petrification*, or, *The Fatal Gazogene*—has found the one-act play a conveniently elastic vessel into which to pour ideas that seemed too slight or too topical for full-length plays. Between *How He Lied to Her Husband* and *A Village Wooing* he has run the gamut from true comedy to preposterous farce.

### Grand Guignol

There is no need to stress the fact that, if humour is better in small doses, so is horror. The terror and pity of tragedy may be stretched over many hours. A work which moves on the exalted level of *Hamlet*, or *The Trojan Women*, or *Ghosts*, or *Mourning Becomes Electra*, exhilarates the beholder, heightens consciousness, and provides the necessary receptivity. Time literally ceases to exist, the beholder is caught up in the Absolute. But horror, whose object is to shock,

cannot be properly sustained on the stage. The Grand Guignol was well advised to confine itself to short plays, and, the more physically horrible they were, the shorter they needed to be. Those with a stomach for such things may be willing to see an old blind woman thrust a pretty girl's curly head into the fire, and may take some pleasure in watching the piling up of significant detail which leads to this pretty spectacle and makes it theatrically inevitable, but the strongest stomach would revolt against a continuance of the scene beyond the point when the thrusting is accomplished and the sizzling of burning hair is achieved! A hasty curtain is the only possible resolution of this particular discord.

But horror, even in Grand Guignol, need not be crude. Louis N. Parker turned W. W. Jacobs's well-known short story, *The Monkey's Paw*, into an effective one-acter in four scenes. Although it is decked out with the stagy trappings of the melodrama—howling wind at significant moments, and the like—it achieves a legitimate effect of horror and incidentally teaches a lesson as deliberately as the old Morality plays. I have said in an earlier chapter that a thriller is a fairy tale in which credulity is only essential up to the fall of the final curtain. *The Monkey's Paw*, being a thriller, must not be blamed, therefore, if a cold-blooded examination of its story arouses scepticism, so long as the horror is sufficiently thrilling, but the moralists may rightly complain if the morality imparted is based on a fallacy. It will be remembered that the character Sergeant-Major Morris comes to his friends, the Whites, with travellers' tales, and a monkey's paw endowed with magical properties by an old fakir who wished to show that people were ruled by fate—"that everything was cut and dried from the beginning, as you might say." Three people were to be allowed, by virtue of the monkey's paw, three wishes. But, though the wishes were granted, the wishers would wish they hadn't been. After proper hesitations and atmosphere-provoking premonitions, Mr. White wishes for two hundred

pounds The wish is fulfilled His son is killed in an accident at the works, and the firm offers a sum of two hundred pounds by way of compensation Ten days after the accident, Mr White, urged by his wife, and against his own will, seizes the monkey's paw and wishes his son alive again The audience is encouraged to bear in its mind the knowledge that the son had been mutilated unrecognizably in the accident, that he has been dead ten days, and, if recalled to life, would be unspeakably horrible to the sight In spite of this, the distraught mother wishes him back, and in a scene conducted partly in darkness—the candle having gone out—the horror of the situation is built up The low knocks on the door announce the return of the reanimated corpse, and a struggle ensues between the father and the mother, the mother eager, at any cost, for the return of her son, the father, aware of the condition in which the son would be, determined to prevent it. The monkey's paw—after a few thrilling and dramatic moments of conflict—plays its part in the situation The clamorous knocking at the door continues while the parents struggle . . . "I wish him dead," declaims the father. The knocking stops abruptly "I wish him dead and at peace!" Simultaneously the old woman opens the door, a flood of moonlight Emptiness The old man sways in prayer on his knees The old woman lies half swooning, wailing against the door-post Curtain

It will be seen that the authors have left nothing out that could help the effectiveness of their play; the elements, the darkness, the knocking, combine with suspense and tension to bring about the desired climax, and succeed It need hardly be pointed out that the philosophy is dubious If the fakir's contention, that "everything was cut and dried from the beginning," were sound, then the monkey's paw and its machinations, the wishes and their consequences, the conflict between the parents and all the rest of it, were preordained from the beginning and the moral which Mr. Jacobs presumably wished to point has no validity. But

this, theatrically speaking, is of no consequence. There can have been few thrillers less open to philosophic doubt than *The Monkey's Paw*.

### Experimentation

Venturesomeness in technique has not been particularly characteristic of the writers of one-acters. The range of expression open to them—from strictest comedy to wildest farce, from rigid realism to unbridled fantasy, tragedy, satire, history, religion, mysticism, Grand Guignol thrills and Cranford charm—has been so great that the need to expand the medium has perhaps not made itself felt. But now and again, following in footsteps of experimenters in longer forms, we find authors who venture outside the established conventions.

The human mind has served as the setting for more than one short play, of which Evreinov's *The Theatre of the Soul* is perhaps the best known. Mr Miles Malleson's "fantastic scrap," as he calls it, *The Little White Thought*, in which all the characters are embodied thoughts—The Thought of Somebody Else's Wealth, The Thought of the Girl he Loves, and so on—disporting themselves in a chamber hung in rich black curtains, was one of the earliest examples, and Mr H. F. Rubinstein's *Insomnia*, with The Ego, Memory, Conscience, and the like as dramatis personae, is another entertaining example of the same method. The link between plays of this kind and the old Moralities, in which Good Deeds, Knowledge, Beauty, and other human characteristics were personified, is sufficiently obvious.

Mr Clifford Bax, in a little play called *Prelude and Fugue*, anticipated the technique of Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* by making the two characters speak their thoughts aloud. The play, although in its entirety very short, is virtually performed twice. The first time, two girls engage in a somewhat desultory conversation while one of them works on a pastel portrait. There are pauses during which Joan, the artist, continues to work, while Rosemary, who is



sitting for her, forgets to pose and turns full-face to the audience. The episode comes to an end, the curtain descends, only to rise again at once, when the episode is repeated. But this time the thoughts of the two girls are spoken—

How wise it was of Nature to shut our thoughts

Behind impenetrable walls of sense .

declares Joan, and during the rest of the play we are enabled to see how flimsy is the connexion between the words we utter and the thoughts we keep to ourselves. It is an unpretentious little play, but it opened doors.

There have doubtless been other experimenters whose work has not come my way. The most suggestive contribution to the technique of the one-act play is probably W. B. Yeats's *Four Plays for Dancers*. Finding the conditions of the modern theatre uncongenial, Dr. Yeats went back to the Nō plays of aristocratic Japan, and his four plays were written with the express intention of dispensing with the trappings of the ordinary theatre. They are intended to be performed without scenery, in a room or any small place where two or three are gathered together, the actors either wearing masks or painting their faces to resemble masks. Here are the preliminary instructions to the first of the plays, *At the Hawk's Well*—

*The stage is any bare space before a wall against which stands a patterned screen. A drum and a gong and a zither have been laid close to the screen before the play begins. If necessary, they can be carried in, after the audience is seated, by the First Musician. The First Musician carries with him a folded black cloth and goes to the centre of the stage towards the front and stands motionless, the folded cloth hanging from between his hands.*

The cloth is slowly unfolded and folded again to denote that the play has begun, and at the end of the play the same simple ceremony is repeated. Plays like these of Yeats's, strange in theme and written in verse which is in itself an incantation, are no doubt peculiarly suitable for this kind of stylized production, but the method need not be restricted in its application. It is roughly that which has held

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the traditional stages of Japan and China for many centuries, and its possibilities might well be further investigated by playwrights weary of the kind of production which leaves nothing to the imagination of the audience. It is obviously destined for an *intimate* art—for the private studio or the drawing-room, and not for the arena. At the present time the tendency is in an opposite direction. We are more likely to develop fresh ways and means of bringing drama and music from some remote studio over the air to our own firesides by means of radio and television than to create our own drama and produce it for the pleasure of a few friends. But it is not impossible that there will be a reaction against this too effortless preoccupation with the arts, some day music-making may return to the home, and, if it does, the Nō-like play may come, too, via W. B. Yeats, and take its place among the many forms of the one-act play.

## CHAPTER XI

### A NOTE ON PLAYS FOR CHILDREN

PLAYS for children are of many kinds and I do not propose even to mention all of them in this note. The kind of play that is written with one eye on the parent and both on the box-office is not my present concern. Plays in that category, ostensibly written for children, are usually entirely unsuited to the child mind. The humour, except when it is knockabout, is generally directed at the adult members of the audience—it either escapes the child altogether and creates a feeling of inferiority, or sets the child puzzling about something it can only imperfectly grasp. The sentiment in such plays is perfunctory or trite and expressed with such a complete lack of conviction that children do not take it seriously—perhaps fortunately. Cheap music, often irrelevant, and songs which have no connexion with the text, are inserted in order to pad out pantomimes of this kind, adding to the confusion and making the whole entertainment far too long for the average child even to try to take in at a sitting. It is not necessary to add that there are exceptions to these generalizations, of which the classic examples are Barrie's *Peter Pan* and Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird*, both of which have been fruitful of base imitations, but these are outside the scope of this note, and in any case would be subject—with certain modifications—to the theorizing contained in the preceding pages. In this chapter I want to write about plays which can be acted by children and grown-ups for the enjoyment of children and such grown-ups as retain a delight in simple things simply presented.

#### **Social Value**

The social value of such plays is becoming more and more generally recognized. The normal child is a natural actor, as I have asserted in the first chapter of this book. Left to

themselves, children will create a world of make-believe which is to them momentarily as real as the world of the senses. It is a matter of common observation that children will accept any convention that is properly presented to them, and "Let's pretend" is a cliché of the nursery. Little boys and girls, playing at kings and queens, need no more than a chair for a throne, a table-cloth for a robe, a tea-cosy for a crown, a toasting-fork for a sceptre. To them "there's nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." Encouraged, there are few limits to their willingness to imagine and believe; and, if *not* encouraged by their elders, they will themselves find ways and means of exercising their faculty of make-believe. I once saw a little street urchin puff up his cheek and assume an air of great suffering. "Coo, I ain't 'arf got a toothache," he whimpered to his friend, who at once entered into the spirit of the comedy and offered to pull out the offending molar.

The vitality of a healthy child is staggering in its abundance, and his need for imaginative expression is so urgent that if it is not properly provided for it will inevitably find an undesirable outlet. The child, father to the man, has a streak of exhibitionism in him which should be given an opportunity to expend itself innocuously. The instinct is healthy enough and is in any case probably ineradicable. It is a commonplace of the animal kingdom—peacocks strut for their own self-glory as well as to the delight of their hens; the male of most species displays himself for the admiration of the female, and the female has her own ways of asserting herself in order to attract attention. The point has been stressed in Chapter I, and need not be further laboured. The great game of life begins in the cradle, and the wise parent shares in the game.

The current practice which looks to education to draw out the latent qualities of the child could have no more devoted handmaid than the drama, and it is therefore not surprising that the more enlightened schools treat the study and acting of plays as a part of their usual curriculum.

Shakespeare, the victim for so many years of unintelligent cramming, may presently find his rightful place in the theatre, performed before audiences consisting of adults who have no unhappy recollections of painful hours devoted to parsing and analysing purple passages, but recall pleasant hours when their dramatic instincts were stimulated by the acting of plays within their emotional and intellectual grasp

### Subjects

Until the young actors have reached their late teens, plays of modern life are probably better avoided. Plays which involve historical or fanciful costumes have several advantages over plays of modern life: (a) children like dressing up—they are wont to shed their self-consciousness with their everyday clothes; (b) to impersonate characters far removed from daily life is a greater stimulus to the imagination than to impersonate the people one sees every day—the latter is likely to degenerate into imitation or caricature, (c) whereas a child of eight may convincingly play the part of a king, a councillor, a witch, or a popular traditional hero, a strong element of absurdity has to be forcibly eliminated from one's mind before one can accept an eight-year-old aping a grown-up of our own time and country. A Columbus of ten years old can be a dignified and convincing figure (I have seen and been convinced), a Gladstone or a Winston Churchill of ten would inevitably be a preposterous travesty. Plays about children of the same ages as the performers are not open to this charge of incongruity, but it will be found in practice that, much as children like to read school-stories, projecting themselves into hair-breadth escapes in which they identify themselves with the heroes and heroines, when they come to act they prefer to detach themselves from the daily round, the common task.

The number of available subjects is almost unlimited. History provides many of the most attractive. Kings and queens, adventurers and pioneers, heroes who have fought

against great odds and won, poor boys who have become rich and famous, girls who have sacrificed themselves for some great cause—these are characters which every ordinary child aspires to play, and, conversely, wily and finally defeated chancellors, villains who are in due course properly thwarted, wicked queens who meet a deserved doom, conspirators who conspire to their own undoing—children are just as eager to impersonate these undesirables, thereby healthily expelling from their systems such incipient cupidity, spitefulness, or sadism as might otherwise be suppressed and develop into morbid complexes. For, however sincerely children may admire virtue and heroism, they are none the less attracted to the opposites. This dual delight is shown in a play which a small friend of mine, aged ten, wrote and sent to me in the hope that I would “publish it.” It is called *Edward the Black Prince*, and bears this verse on the title-page—

Once in the court of Edward III  
     was born a baby  
         not fat nor slim  
     and this is  
         the story  
     I am going to tell of him

The young author shows throughout that he is on the side of the angels, but, alas, the most vivid scenes are those which reveal a delight in violence. The opening is comparatively tame—

EDWARD III Now I will begin I am going to make war with France, I will not lose my possessions (*The court starts up with amazement*) Why what is the matter with ye now gentles all, ye look fair baron Royon as one who has sat on a hornets' nest

QUEEN PHILIPPA But sure this is so sudden where will you get money for the war

EDWARD III Ah dame I will get money right enough, I'll get it from Parliament or church, never you fear

But in the next scene things begin to move. The Black

Prince informs "Sarlisbury" that, the French having wronged us—

now we are going to wrong them, the dogs, ha ha ha ha ha whereupon Sir Richard—

I love to think of their blood upon my sword

Against this bloodthirstiness, however, it is only fair to quote the piety—

SALISBURY We will need plenty of rest to-night

ROYON Ay, and plenty of prayers

BLACK PRINCE That is right we sure will

This last phrase, it will be observed, employs modern idiom in the manner of the fashionable school of historical drama

The average child, at least until the age of adolescence, is rarely able to appreciate psychological subtlety, and, in taking historical incidents for conversion into plays, the author would be wasting time and skill if he attempted to invest the *dramatis personae* with the finer shades of characterization. Without materially injuring his conception, he will find it possible to build up convincing personalities from which the more obscure or questionable features have been excised, leaving these for later study to reveal to the inquiring child. It would be inexcusable, in spite of the example of Shakespeare and many of his illustrious successors, actually to falsify historical figures even if by so doing one brought them within the mental grasp of infants. But a legitimate compromise can be achieved in most cases without difficulty. What is essential is that the personages chosen should be endowed with a set of easily assimilable characteristics—leaving out half-shades and ambiguities—and placed in circumstances which will most vividly and convincingly display them. There are no doubt innumerable scenes in the plays of Shakespeare which can be grasped by the immature mind, but there are innumerable others which ought never to be submitted to the test. I have heard unhappy children struggling with Prospero's magnificent

rhetoric and Caliban's Freudian excesses, and hope never again to witness such an exhibition of cruelty to minors

Traditional stories, legends, and fairy tales are perennially popular and provide even greater opportunities than historical subjects. It is a mistake to imagine that the modern child is interested only in aeroplanes, the wireless, detective exploits, and gangsters. My own experience has proved the contrary. New fairy tales are slow to take root, but the old are as popular as ever. They appeal to something fundamental, and even little boys who have supped on cinema excitements will quickly shed their sense of superiority if understandingly handled. Fairy tales offer chances to imaginative children to appear larger than life and find compensation for the small—but to them large—tragedies of their daily lives. The wonders of Aladdin's cave are thrown open to them, they are permitted to revel in fantasies which school life and home life deny them, they may engage in exploits which give them a sense of power and achievement, chivalry is encouraged, and obstacles which seemed insurmountable are always overcome in the end. These things help to stimulate their imagination and to nourish whatever there is of optimism in their natures. It is, I hope, supererogatory to add that sentimentality—never excusable—is the worst of all possible blemishes in work for children, the training of whose emotional values demands the most scrupulous honesty.

### **Technique**

The technique of the play for children is not essentially different from the technique of the play for adults; but there are certain special limitations which should be borne in mind. The dramatist should not be too conscious of the fact that he is writing for child actors—that might lead to the unforgivable sin of "writing down" which children rightly resent—but it would be just as absurd to write above their heads, employing words which they are not likely to understand, even after explanation, or turns of expression



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which would convey nothing to them. Children are only too ready to roll off rounded rhetorical phrases from Shakespeare and Holy Writ without the least inkling of their purport. A little of this may not do them any harm, but it would be difficult to show that it did them any good. I should like to make it an instructor's first task to see that no child uttered words or phrases which it did not understand, and certainly no playwright who has any claim at all to write for children needs to be told what words and phrases may be legitimately put into their mouths. Slang and other jargon should be used sparingly, and foreign words calculated to make a child self-conscious are better eliminated, but, these exceptions apart, the author will find that there is an almost boundless richness of language open to him, and it is his own lack of skill or poverty of vocabulary, and not a shortcoming in the young actors, if he finds that his dialogue fails to trip easily from the youthful tongue.

The length of a play for children is determined by practical considerations. The child's staying-power being less than the adult's, full-length plays are undesirable except in the case of episodic or pageant plays in which each section is virtually a separate play, and even in these cases special care should be taken that children are not allowed to become over-tired, waiting for their turn and lingering on in a state of excitement long after their own particular episode has been disposed of. Ordinarily a play should not take longer than an hour and a half in performance, this, with intervals and such habitual irrelevancies as speech-making, makes a sufficiently long entertainment, long enough for children taking part and long enough for the children in the audience, whose power of concentration is not likely to be equal to more. For similar reasons, plays should be broken up into shorter lengths than plays for adults demand. Long acts are an excessive tax upon the young actor's powers of endurance unless they are divided into two or three scenes. Plays which are not expected to provide the main fare may be of any length, ranging from fifteen to sixty minutes, and

forty-five minutes seems to be particularly suitable—not too long for the concentrated attention of a youthful audience, nor for the histrionic staying-power of youthful actors, and a manageable length for rehearsals

### Rehearsals

A word on rehearsals. If the producer is also a teacher, he must not take an unfair advantage of his position of authority. When the school-room becomes the stage, it should take on the free atmosphere of the theatre, and academic robes should be shed. The teacher should never forget that the production of a play, even when it forms part of the normal school curriculum, is a communal activity in which the producer is only one, if an important one, of the participators. Perhaps its chief value is that it encourages the team spirit, and this would be almost nullified if the producer should don the mantle of a dictator instead of working hand in glove with the young actors, drawing out their special gifts, offering encouragement whenever possible, and never damping enthusiasm. In the long run the producer of a children's play, like the producer of any play, must be autocratic, but the producer with tact and understanding always persuades and never coerces, this process of self-abnegation leaves the budding actor with the impression that his inspiration is entirely from within, his self-consciousness drops from him and he acquires that poise which will be of immeasurable value to him when he grows up.

The uncommonly gifted child will present more difficulties to the teacher-producer than the dullard. Some children will inevitably display more talent than others, and the producer must guard against exploiting them unduly. That would be a double offence—an offence against the talented children themselves, who would be in danger of becoming conceited, giving themselves airs in the presence of their schoolfellows, and developing all the failings of the prig, and an offence against the less talented

children, who might develop a sense of inferiority if they were constantly aware of their shortcomings. In most plays expressly designed for children there are numerous characters, of varying degrees of importance, and if the less talented are given roles which demand less skill, and play them adequately, there is little danger of their feeling slighted.

It would be advisable, also, to see that the more brilliant children are sometimes made to play unimportant parts. If the producer, taking the children into his confidence, explains that every part is really as important as every other part; that one could not exist without the other, that leading roles depend for their effectiveness upon the "feeding" which they receive from minor roles, that the success of the play as a whole is the important thing and not the success of individual actors—he will find a quick response and ready loyalty. Let the most talented youngster in the troupe see how his own cleverness trickles away ineffectively when some unready maiden fails to come in sharply on her cue, and he will soon realize how interdependent the members of the company are—and doubtless the unready maiden will be no less aware!

Arising out of this, young people are, generally speaking, fairly quick at learning their lines, and sharpen their memory for other purposes in the process; where they are apt to fail is in learning their cues. Ugly gaps between set speeches are a commonplace of children's performances and often mar an otherwise acceptable show. The only way to avoid them is by convincing the children that cues are just as important as lines and should be learnt just as assiduously. Some of them will end by learning all the roles and become active in prompting their duller fellows. It is also essential to point out that a cue is sometimes a cue for silence. Children, in their eagerness to demonstrate that they have not forgotten their words, are loth to allow a pause to follow a speech. The producer should be at pains to explain the significance of any given pause, and not arbitrarily demand

it The child who knows the psychological reason why he has to remain silent is more likely, when the cue comes, to wait the required length of time than one who has been told that on hearing the cue "Now, what is that, I wonder?" he must count five to himself before saying his speech. When it is possible to do so without destroying the required dramatic effect, it is a good idea to fill in a silence with some movement, however slight, which leads logically to the next speech and may itself serve as a cue. The blank look which is apt to disfigure the face of the child actor who has nothing either to say or to do must be avoided at all costs. Perhaps the chief value of acting is that it is an act of re-creation, and the continuousness of the effort is thus peculiarly important, not only from an artistic but from a psychological standpoint. The character should be assumed before the curtain rises and only dropped when it falls—a counsel of perfection which applies as much to grown-up actors as to children!

### Scenery

The subject of scenery scarcely comes within my present purview, but I should like to interpose a word on behalf of conventional or curtain settings. Painted scenery for school performances, or for performances by Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, and other bodies which specialize in children's plays, is hardly ever satisfactory. It is only in the rarest of cases that there is enough money available to pay for scenery to be painted specially, and hired scenery is generally nondescript, uninspired and uninspiring, out of date, stereotyped, and completely lacking in imagination. When, as is the case at some enlightened schools, there are youthful carpenters, designers, painters, seamstresses who are ready to lend a hand special scenery has a great deal to be said for it. Even if it should turn out to be amateurish in design and inefficient in execution, it may well be endowed with the freshness and individuality which often distinguishes work done for love, even when done incompetently. But, failing special circumstances such as these, curtains, with

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perhaps an occasional "flat" or screen, provide all that is absolutely essential for a suitable background. Appropriate costumes, the right "properties," and a few pieces of real or imitation tapestry will give plenty of scope for colourful and imaginative stage-pictures, and the neutral character of curtains will at least ensure that the *wrong* ideas are not conveyed to the audience. Bad imitations of palaces and homes are infinitely less successful than curtains which are not imitations at all but are only a hint to the audience that its co-operation in an effort of imagination is required. If the necessary atmosphere cannot be evoked by means of good diction, convincing acting, imaginative costumes, artfully introduced music, and such adequate lighting as is available, the lame attempts of hack scene-painters are not going to be of much use. The simpler the setting that is likely to be at his command, the more vividly must the playwright perform his share of the task. However distantly, he must follow in the footsteps of Shakespeare, whose language, unsupported by carpenter and scene-painter, brought the forest of Arden, Cleopatra's barge, and the pomp and circumstance of the courts to the bare boards of the Globe Theatre.



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*Hoppla!* (Toller)  
*Pierrot Before the Seven Doors* (Cantillon)  
*Which World, Which Way?* (Toller)  
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